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ON PRODUCTION AND USE OF TOKENS OF “I”¹

SUMMARY: In this paper, I analyze the semantics of the first person pronoun “I” from the perspective of the user/producer distinction. In the first part of the paper, I describe the Simple View (SV) and propose three interpretations of its thesis (following de Gaynesford, 2006). In the second part, I analyze the notions of use and production of a linguistic token. In the next part, I show that all of the interpretations of SV are sensitive to counterexamples. In the end, I discuss possible answers of the proponents of SV and argue against them. The first aim of this paper is to show that SV is wrong, and the second is to convince the reader that the user/producer distinction is of high importance in the philosophy of language.

KEYWORDS: indexical expression, pure indexicals, I, user, producer, use, production, de Gaynesford.

1. Introduction

What kind of facts constitute the reference of “I”? When I utter “I am hungry”, it refers to me. When you write “I don’t like the government” on the wall, it refers to you. But in virtue of what is it so? The orthodox answer to this question points toward the simple facts about the context: my utterance of “I” refers to me because I am the agent of the described context; your inscription on the wall refers to you since you are the agent of this context. According to this line of

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reasoning, which I will call the Simple View (SV), such simple facts about the context suffice to determine the referent of “I”.

In this paper, I argue that the Simple View is ambiguous and, moreover, that it is wrong under each of its readings. In the first part of the paper, I describe the Simple View and propose three plausible interpretations of its thesis. The first interpretation says that the agent of the context is the user of “I”, the second states that it is the producer of “I”, and the third is that it is either the user or the producer. In the second part, I analyze the notions of use and production of a linguistic token. In the next part, I show that all interpretations of SV are sensitive to counterexamples. In the end, I discuss a possible answer of the proponents of SV and argue against it. The paper has two aims: the first is to show that SV is wrong, and the second is to convince the reader that the user/producer distinction is of high importance in the philosophy of language.

My investigations are inspired and influenced by the book *I: The Meaning of the First Person Term* by Maximillian de Gaynesford (2006).² In the book, he argues against the interpretation of “I” as a pure indexical expression and proposes a theory of the semantics of “I” as a prototype of demonstrative.³ In my paper, I begin with considering his claim about the ambiguity of SV and elaborate on it. I propose an analysis of the notions of production and use of a linguistic token that are important in de Gaynesford’s argumentation against the orthodox semantics of “I”. I also generalize his counterexamples to SV to adjust them to its different formulations.

Throughout this paper, I assume that the uses of expressions are the bearers of semantic properties, such as reference. By uses I mean acts of using a token of an expression to communicate or to contribute a constituent to the propositional or communicated content.⁴ The two alternative bearers of reference—types or tokens of expressions—do not seem plausible candidates. Theories treating types of expressions as having the reference cannot accommodate the variability of reference of indexicals or other context-sensitive expressions. Tokens of expressions have a similar problem: it seems they can change meaning with the change of the occasion of use. I am not saying that there are no unused (in the sense indicated above) tokens that have a reference. I believe though, that they can have a reference in virtue of their future, past, or possible uses. Nevertheless, there is no more I can say here on this matter and I will not argue for it in such a short paper.

² The classic monograph on the subject is (Brinck, 1997).

³ For a discussion of de Gaynesford’s claim and arguments, see (Penco, 2021).

⁴ Note that this understanding of “use” differs from the Strawsonian one (cf. Strawson, 1950) and semiotic notions of use and usage (Pelc, 1971; Ciecierski, 2021). It seems, however, that we can treat the semiotic notion of use as an equivalence class of uses (in the sense assumed in the present paper) of the equivalence relation of having the same referent.

2. The Simple View

The Simple View says that the simple facts about the context are sufficient to determine the referent of the given use of “I”. By simple facts about the context, we mean answers to the following questions: “What is the time of use?”, “Where it is used?”, “Who is the agent?”.⁵ Moreover, proponents of the Simple View usually claim that it is an instantiation of a more general rule: such simple facts about the context constitute the reference of all the so-called *pure indexicals*.

David Kaplan, in his seminal papers *On the Logic of Demonstratives* (1979) and *Demonstratives* (1989a), provides us with the formal semantic theory of indexicals: both *true demonstratives*—indexicals that need accompanying demonstration to refer (like “this”, “that”, “he”, “over there”), and pure indexicals—indexical expressions that refer solely in virtue of the linguistic meaning of the expression (like “here”, “now” or “I”). Kaplan offers a unified framework for treating both kinds of indexicals. He proposes a distinction between two kinds of meaning of an indexical expression: linguistic meaning (character in Kaplan’s terminology) and content.⁶ The character of a demonstrative, like “this”, may be given by “the object indicated by the speaker”. In order to determine the content of “this” in a given situation of its use, we need to have an additional piece of information about the context, namely, information about which object was indicated by the speaker of the context. In the case of pure indexicals, says the Simple View, we do not need more information than the information about the time, the place, or the agent. The character of “I” picks exactly the agent of the utterance. To determine the content of “now”, we need only the time of the utterance, and to determine the content of “here”, we need only the place of the utterance. There is nothing more in the linguistic meaning of these expressions.

The semantic thesis of SV is that the reference of the use of a token of “I” is not only described, but fully determined by the following Simple Rule:⁷

(SR) The referent of the use of “I” is always the agent of the context of the use.

The rule is indeed very simple. The agent is one of the elements of the context and the information about the agent’s identity is the only one we need to determine the reference of any use of “I”. It is quite unusual for a referring expression. Consider e.g., expressions like “this” or “he”. To fix the reference of utterances of these expressions, we need additional elements of the context: at least a demonstration or information about contextual salience. In the case of “I”, or any other pure indexical, we only need one specific element of the context.

⁵ Sometimes also a little peculiar question “What world it is?”. In general, we may regard simple facts about the context, as facts concerning chosen subset of contextual coordinates in David Lewis’ terminology from (Lewis, 1970).

⁶ To be metaphysically precise: linguistic meaning is a property of expression types, whereas content is a property of concrete uses of expression tokens.

⁷ I take the notion of the Simple Rule from (de Gaynesford, 2006).

The Simple View looks very simple but it is ambiguous, as was noted by de Gaynesford (2006, Chapter 2). For, to understand it fully, we have to answer two nontrivial questions:

1. What is the context of use?
2. What is the agent of the context?

The first question arises when one is considering examples of so-called remote utterances (Sidelle, 1991; Briciu, 2017). The second one is due to the possibility of using the same token to express different propositions (Corazza et al., 2002).

There are two sensible answers to the first question: the context of making an actual utterance, inscription, sign, etc. or the intended context of interpretation. This issue becomes vividly noticeable in cases of remote utterances, such as the widely discussed Answering Machine Paradox (Sidelle, 1991).⁸ The paradox concerns the semantic evaluation of the statement “I am not here now” recorded on the machine and played during the absence of the person who had recorded it. Such a statement would be true on the second interpretation of context since a person intended the utterance to be interpreted while he or she is not in the place of utterance, but it would be false on the first reading of “context” (Predelli, 1998). I do not want to go deeper into this subject here, but the distinction between contexts of the actual utterance and context of the intended interpretation is worth bearing in mind, while considering the second distinction.

When it comes to the second question, there are also at least two possible answers to it. The agent of the context may be understood as a person who produced the token of an expression (e.g., made a scribble on the wall or produced a sequence of sound waves) or as a person who used the token (e.g., made a political confession using a token of a sentence).⁹ In most cases, the distinction has no importance for fixing the referent of “I”, but, as we shall see, there are cases in which the distinction is crucial.

Both of the interpretations of the phrase “the agent of the context” can be found in philosophical literature. It is quite commonplace to see statements like: “Whenever [the expression “I”] is used by a speaker of English, it stands for, or designates, that person” (Barwise, Perry, 1981, p. 670); “‘I’ refers to the speaker or writer [...] of the relevant occurrence of the word ‘I’” (Kaplan, 1989, p. 505); “Any token of ‘I’ refers to whoever produced it” (Campbell, 1994, p. 102).¹⁰

⁸ To the best of my knowledge, a similar problem was first described by Vision (1985).

⁹ The phrase “use of the token” is ambiguous. I mean here using it in a “proper way”, for communication purposes. We may use a token of a word just to check the microphone before the talk, but it is not the use we are talking about here. Just as we do not count supporting the piano with *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language* as using it properly.

¹⁰ For a list of similar formulations and a discussion of differences between them see the work of de Gaynesford (2006, p. 36–39)

Often all kinds of such rules are present in the writings of a single philosopher. It seems that it is due rather to the ambiguity of the rule that the authors want to express, than to any serious disagreement between them. For example, “the speaker or writer” from Kaplan’s quote is ambiguous between the two readings: the user and the producer.

We might therefore indicate three different interpretations of the rule (SR):

(SR-1) The referent of the use of “I” is always its user.

(SR-2) The referent of the use of “I” is always its producer.

(SR-3) The referent of the use of “I” is always either its user or its producer.¹¹

Which is the correct rule describing the reference of the use of “I”? I will argue that neither of them is the right one. But before that, we shall elucidate the distinction between the user and the producer of the token of an expression.

3. The User/Producer Distinction

As we have seen, there is certain sloppiness in the use of terms “producer” and “user” and the usage of “product” and “use” in philosophical literature. However, there is a reason for this terminological mess in philosophical discussions. The reason is simple: in most cases, it does not matter whether we talk about the user or about the producer of the linguistic token since both notions coincide in the standard examples. When I utter “I am hungry” in a casual conversation, I am both the user and the producer of the given token of the word “I”. This use of “I” refers to me and there is no need to ask, whether it is so in virtue of me being a producer of the token of the word “I” or in virtue of me being its user.

It is, however, worth noticing that, although these two notions often overlap, they may also split in some cases. When a painter paints “Phone Oxford 1212 if you wish to complain about me” on hundreds of cars, he produces tokens of that sentence type. A driver who drives one of these cars uses the token to communicate certain content. The painter is the producer of the token which is used by the driver (de Gaynesford, 2006, p. 49). Similarly, if I find a piece of paper on a street with a written token of the sentence “Can you spare a quarter?”, I can use it to ask people whether they can spare a quarter, without producing the token of the sentence type (Cappelen, 2011, p. 95). In this example, I am the user of the token and the producer is the person who wrote the sentence on the piece of paper I found.

¹¹ The third interpretation was not indicated in de Gaynesford’s book, but it seems to be a viable option. Moreover, it is not falsified by the counterexamples given in the book. I formulate this option as an exclusive disjunction. It cannot be formulated as a simple disjunction since, as we shall see, in some cases the user and the producer of the token are not the same people. The first person pronoun “I” is a singular referring term and hence has to pick out exactly one element of the context as a reference of the token of “I”.

It is sometimes the case that the producer and the user are the same people but the production and the use are made in a different time or place. Consider the case of remote utterances. When on Sunday I write a post-it note for Monday stating that “I am not here today”, to inform people that on Monday I will be absent from my room, I produce the token of “I am not here today”, but I do not use it. I use it by putting the note on the door of my room. If I used it in the time of producing, I would be lying. But, obviously, no one can call me a liar in virtue of merely producing the token. Similarly, when I record a message for an answering machine: “Hi! I cannot talk right now”, I produce the token by recording it, but it is used only when it is listened to by someone who is calling.

Both production and use are intentional actions. The producer and the user are agents performing respective acts. The user is an agent who uses the token to communicate or to contribute a constituent to the propositional or communicated content. The producer is an agent who produces the token *qua* physical object. In normal cases, like in the case of my utterance “I am hungry” during a conversation, an event of my utterance can be described in both ways. I intentionally produce certain sounds using my vocal cords and, at the same time, I use these sounds to express the proposition that I am hungry to my interlocutor.

We may note some obvious differences between the acts of production and use of linguistic tokens. For each token of a linguistic entity, there is only one act of production of the token, but there may be several different uses. For example, the “Do not disturb” sign may be produced once and then be used on several occasions by guests of a hotel. On the other hand, a token may be produced by more than one person in a more complex process of production. Consider for example the giant token of the name “Hollywood”, which was probably produced by several different workers.

It is also worth noticing that acts of using and producing a linguistic token have different criteria of success. I can produce a token of a Chinese word 單詞 without any idea what it means, how it is used in a Chinese-speaking community, or even without being able to recognize the different parts that it is composed of. Without knowledge about the usage of this word, it is hard to imagine how I can intentionally use it as a word.

This is not to say that there are no requirements for being a producer of a linguistic token. Such requirements are the matter of a heated debate between philosophers. Some authors claim that the intention to produce the very word 單詞 will be necessary for it being a token of this word (Kaplan, 1990; 2011). Others point toward the requirements of orthographic shape (Katz, 2000; Wetzel, 2009) or the adjustment to the conventions of a given linguistic community (Cappelen, 1999; Hawthorne, Lepore, 2011). I do not want to get deeper into this rabbit hole here. It is, however, worth having in mind that there are requirements for effective production of a linguistic token and that they are distinct from requirements for successful use.

The crucial difference is that users and producers have different aims in their actions. The producer of the linguistic token aims at producing a physical object:

a scribble, a sequence of sound waves, or several Morse signals. He or she produces the token *qua* physical entity. The user, on the other hand, treats the token as possessing semantic properties like meaning, reference, and so on. He or she uses the token as a part of a particular language to express his or her thoughts. Moreover, the user is not aware of the properties of the token *qua* physical object, while using it.¹²

I believe that the precise definition of the use and production of linguistic tokens is a matter of high importance for semantics and metaphysics of language. It is, however, a difficult task that would require deliberations extending the scope of this paper. For our purposes, it suffices to be aware of the distinction. It will help us to show that the Simple View is wrong under each of the interpretations stipulated above.

4. Counterexamples to the Simple View

Proponents of the Simple View state that the reference of the given use of “I” is determined by the simple facts concerning who the agent of the context is. The reference is given by the Simple Rule:

(SR) The referent of the use of the token of “I” is the agent of the context of use.

As we have noticed, there is an ambiguity between the three interpretations of (SR). The agent of the context may be understood as the person who used the token (SR-1) or as the person who produced it (SR-2), or as either of them (SR-3). Now I am going to show counterexamples to all three interpretations.

From our remarks about the notion of a producer of a linguistic token, it should be quite clear that (SR-2) is not a suitable interpretation of (SR). There are many possible cases in which a person is not the referent of the token of “I”, despite being its producer. For example, I may speak in court on behalf of a mute person. When I say “I admit to committing this crime” for her, the referent of “I” is she, not me, although I produced the token using my vocal cords (de Gaynesford, 2006, p. 41). In a more extreme scenario, I may be forced to speak by a demon who possessed my poor soul, by a mad scientist, or by a professional hypnotist. In these situations, when I say, “I am capable of possessing his poor soul”, the token of “I” that I produced surely does not refer to me. It refers to the possessor, who is using me to express the proposition that he is capable of possessing my poor soul. There are of course more mundane cases in which the producer is not a referent of the token of “I”. Imagine a man working in a factory that produces stickers with an inscription: “Don’t blame me: I voted for Trump”.

¹² This may be treated as a different formulation of the so-called semantic transparency principle. According to this principle, derived from (Husserl, 2001), the user of a sign is focused on its meaning and not on the sign itself, while using it (for a discussion of the principle, see, e.g., Ossowski, 1926; Koj, 1963).

No matter how many stickers the man produced, we will not count them as expressions of his political opinions. He is just not a referent of “I” printed on these stickers. Therefore, we cannot praise or blame him for the sense expressed by the inscription.

Maybe then the referent of the use of the token of “I” is always its user, as stipulated by (SR-1)? With the user/producer distinction it is not difficult to come up with a counterexample to such interpreted Simple Rule. Consider the following example. Alice and Bob are neighbors. Bob is well known in the community as a reliable member of the Democratic Party, who would never vote for a Republican. Alice wants to play a prank on Bob, so she buys a sticker “Don’t blame me: I voted for Trump” and she puts it on Bob’s door. The prank may not be very witty, but if it is successful, the readers of the inscription on the sticker will interpret the token of “I” as referring to Bob.

It seems therefore that we have a counterexample for both the user interpretation (SR-1) and the disjunctive interpretation (SR-3) of the Simple Rule. Neither Alice nor Bob are producers of the token of I. Alice is the user, but not the producer, and Bob is neither the user nor the producer of the inscription on the sticker. It is Alice who acted intentionally to express a proposition that Bob voted for Trump. Bob wasn’t even aware of her action. But it is Bob, not Alice, to whom the use of the token of “I” refers.

Someone may point out that the use of “I” in the example refers to Bob because the interpreter believes that Bob is the user of the token. Alice’s prank consists of pretending that it was Bob who put the sticker on the door. But it is not a plausible response. When a man walks around with a “kick me” sticker on his back, no one thinks that he put the sign by himself. And even in such a case, “me” refers to the man. If Alice’s prank is revealed, Bob would say “Someone made a political confession on my behalf” rather than “I told you! I just wasn’t the referent of ‘I’ on the sticker.”

It seems that a proper user cannot be ignorant of using a linguistic token. The use of a linguistic token is an intentional action. As such it can impose certain commitments on the agent—the user. The nature of such commitments varies with respect to specific kinds of uses. For example, when a user uses a token of the sentence *p* to make an assertion, she is committed to believing that *p*. When she uses a token of the sentence “Is *q*?” to ask a question, we normally expect that she does not know whether *q*.¹³ We cannot expect the fulfillment of such commitments based on unintentional quasi-uses as Bob’s in the example above. It just would not be right.

The other response to the example may be that such uses of the tokens of “I” just fail to refer. But it is counterintuitive. These uses are treated by normal, competent users of language as if they referred. They understand such uses perfectly and treat them as meaningful uses of language. I see no other motivation

¹³ With the exception of very specific kinds of questions, like rhetoric questions, or questions asked during an oral exam.

for the claim that such uses do not refer, than a desperate attempt to rescue the Simple View.

The reader may notice the striking similarity between the presented counterexamples to SV and the case described by Alan Sidelle in *The Answering Machine Paradox* (1991). In his paper, Sidelle presents the example of an utterance that may be seen as a counterexample to the rule similar to (SR). The rule concerns the semantics of the uses of “now” and may be stated as follows:

(SR-Now) The reference of the use of the token of “now” is always the time of the use.

From such a rule David Kaplan derived a consequence that no utterance of “I am not here now” can be true (Kaplan, 1977, p. 509). Sidelle presents the counterexample to this claim. He describes a situation in which such utterance is intuitively true. It is the context of listening to the recorded message “I am not here now” on an answering machine. Intuitively, when it is listened to by the calling person, it is true if and only if the person who recorded the message is not in the place of its use at the time of the call.

Sidelle proposes to resolve the paradox by postulating the existence of so-called deferred utterances. The utterance is deferred when it is not the case that the utterer is in place of the utterance at the time of making it. In the less ambiguous terminology, which is preferred in this paper, such a phenomenon will be called deferred use. Sidelle compares deferred uses to actions performed at distance, like a bomb detonation. If one places a bomb on a plane, one destroys the plane when the bomb explodes, though one may be thousands of miles away (1991, p. 535). Similarly, deferred uses are actions performed at distances (both spatial and temporal). From the description, it is obvious that the use of “I am not here now” is deferred. It does not make sense to say that it is used while recording since the use of a meaningful expression has a fixed reference. It would have an unpleasant consequence that each use of the sentence would be false, despite being perfectly understandable and intuitively true. Whether the production of the token of “I am not here now” in the paradox is also in some sense deferred is a matter for another discussion.

The similarity between presented counterexamples and the case described by Sidelle can motivate us to introduce a generalized notion of deferred use. Generalized deferred use is a use of a token of a linguistic expression which is a different event from the production of the token. The difference may lie e.g., in the time or place of the use and production. Presented counterexamples to (SR-1), (SR-2), and (SR-3) can be viewed as cases of generalized deferred uses. In the case of the “Don’t blame me” sticker, its use by Alice is deferred, because it is different as an event from the production which takes place in a different place and time.

A proponent of SV may be tempted to say that her view properly describes all the standard cases of uses of tokens of “I”, while counterexamples, which employ cases of generalized deferred uses, can be treated as deviant cases. A defender of

SV may propose that the Simple Rule is in fact a *ceteris paribus* rule concerning only standard, nondeferred uses. The rule may be formulated in the following way:

(CP-SR) If the use of the token of “I” is not deferred, its reference is always the user of the token.¹⁴

However, I believe that such a rule is also incorrect. Even though there are cases in which the acts of use and production of the token of “I” are identical, there is only one producer identical with the user of the token, who is not the referent of “I”. In short, there are also counterexamples to (CP-SR). For example, consider a puppeteer who is animating a puppet on a stage. She may speak on behalf of an animated puppet followed by a puppet villain and say “I’m in great danger!”. In this case, the token of the sentence “I’m in great danger!” is produced by the puppeteer, who is also at the same time using it to express the proposition that the puppet is in great danger.¹⁵

One may refute the counterexample, saying that it is not a normal conversational context. The puppeteer is behaving just as she is communicating something, but she is not. She just simulates an utterance of a fictional character. This counterexample inherits all the controversies concerning the use of language in fictional discourse. But a similar example may be given in a nonfictional conversational context. Consider an utterance made by Alice the ventriloquist, who wants to speak on behalf of her friend Bob. Similarly to the case of the sticker prank, we may imagine that Alice wants to make a joke on Bob at a meeting of the teaching staff at the university they both work at. Alice, using her ventriloquist skills, may utter the token of the sentence “I think that the Chancellor is a fool” on behalf of Bob (cf. Corazza et al., 2001, p. 15). In this case, she is the producer of the token of this sentence, and she uses it to communicate something about Bob. Moreover, the use and production are the same physical event, hence it is not a deferred use of the sentence. But the referent of “I” is Bob, not Alice.

I believe that the proposed counterexamples show quite convincingly that the Simple View is not the right stance in the debate on the semantics of “I”, and, more broadly, on the semantics of so-called pure indexicals. This is, however, nothing more than a negative result. I believe that it can and should be taken into consideration by philosophers who want to describe the semantics of indexical expressions, but it does not itself endorse any view on that matter. What it does show is that any theory of indexicals should very carefully take into account the distinction between use and production in proposing and assessing semantic theories.

¹⁴ Of course, it is equivalent to the rule stipulating that the referent of a nondeferred use is its producer since, by definition, the user is identical to the producer in such cases.

¹⁵ Or the fictional character represented by the puppet.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I argued against the claim that the uses of tokens of the word “I” refer in virtue of the simple fact about the context, namely the fact about who the agent of the context is. I showed three possible interpretations of such a claim: the first that uses of “I” always refer to its producer, the second that they always refer to the user of the token, and the third stating that it refers to either of them. I proposed counterexamples to all interpretations of the thesis and also to its *ceteris paribus* version. These examples show that we have to abandon the Simple View about the semantics of “I”, and possibly, about all of the so-called pure indexicals. The paper does not argue in favor of any alternative view about the semantics of “I”, but I think it shows that any such semantics has to bear in mind the distinction between the user and the producer of linguistic tokens.

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