

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A Note on Essential Indexicals of Direction

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Some authors claim that ‘I’ and ‘now’ are essential indexicals, in the sense that they cannot be eliminated in favor of other indexicals or nonindexical expressions. This article argues that three indexicals of direction—one for each spatial dimension (e.g., ‘up’, ‘front’, and ‘left’)—must also be regarded essential, insofar as they are used as pure indexicals and not as demonstratives.

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Indexicals are said to be essential in two ways: (a) because a language without them is less expressive than our own and (b) because some specific indexicals (the essential ones) cannot be eliminated in favor of others. That indexicals are essential in the former sense has been argued by Strawson (2–19), Prior (12–17), Gale (53–59), Putnam (3–51) and others.¹ That some indexicals are essential in the latter sense is the view held by Perry (“The Problem of the Essential Indexical”), Austin (*What is the Meaning of “This”?*), Corazza (341), and others. This article is about essential indexicals in the latter sense. The prevailing view in the literature is that only ‘I’ and ‘now’ are essential in this sense. This article argues that the prevailing view is wrong and that besides ‘I’ and ‘now’, at least three indexicals of direction—one for each spatial dimension (e.g., ‘up’, ‘front’, and ‘left’)—must also be regarded as essential, insofar as they are used as pure indexicals and not as demonstratives.²

Essential indexicals

Here is an illustration of the view that only ‘I’ and ‘now’ are essential indexicals:

... it is plausible to suppose that other indexicals can be eliminated in favor of “I” and “now”. Perhaps “That is Lake Gilmore” just comes to “What I see now in front of me is Lake Gilmore”. But elimination of either “I” or “now” in favor of the others seems impossible. (Perry “The Problem of the Essential Indexical” 46)³

Notice, however, that the sentence “What I see now in front of me is Lake Gilmore” contains not only the indexicals ‘I’ and ‘now’ but also ‘in front of’, which is a demonstrative of direction. As we shall see below, when used as a pure indexical, and

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not as a demonstrative, phrases such as ‘in front of’ cannot be eliminated without loss in favor of phrases containing no indexicals other than ‘I’ and ‘now’.

The distinction between pure indexicals and demonstratives comes from Kaplan (489). ‘In front of’ in the quotation above is a *demonstrative*, because “an associated demonstration” is required (491). For example, a hand gesture or the direction toward which the speaker’s nose or eyes are pointing. Whenever demonstratives are used, “supplementary actions or intentions are needed” (491) to determine the intended referent. It is indeed true that all indexicals, even indexicals of direction, can be eliminated in favor of ‘I’ and ‘now’ *plus* an associated *demonstration*. In Perry’s example above ‘in front of’ just comes to ‘the direction toward which my hand (or nose) is pointing now’, or just ‘this direction’ [pointing in some direction]. Similarly, ‘the person in front of me’ is just ‘the person I am facing now’, and ‘the person to my left’ is just ‘the person next to the side of my body where, say, my wristwatch is now’.

However, if we are to eliminate indexicals in favor of demonstratives, then we can go ahead and also eliminate ‘I’ and ‘now’ in favor of ‘this’ *plus* an associated demonstration, which is exactly what Russell proposed:

All egocentric words [Russell’s word for ‘indexicals’] can be defined in terms of “this”. Thus: “I” means “The biography to which this belongs”; “here” means “The place of this”; “now” means “The time of this”; and so on. (*Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* 108)

This shows that if we are to make sense of the notion that some indexicals are essential, then the claim must be that some indexicals cannot be eliminated in favor of—or defined in terms of—other *pure* indexicals. Of the various arguments supporting this claim in the literature, we shall mention only very briefly some semantic and epistemic reasons for it, as well as Perry’s explanation of behavior argument. The main point of this article is merely that if those reasons are to hold for ‘I’ and ‘now’, they must also hold for three pure indexicals of direction. Here is Perry’s argument for ‘I’:

I once followed a trail of sugar on a supermarket floor, pushing my cart down the aisle on one side of a tall counter and back the aisle on the other, seeking the shopper with the torn sack to tell him he was making a mess. With each trip around the counter, the trail became thicker. But I seemed unable to catch up. Finally it dawned on me. I was the shopper I was trying to catch . . . (“The Problem of the Essential Indexical” 33)

Suppose I had said, in the manner of de Gaulle, “I came to believe that John Perry is making a mess.” I would no longer have explained why I stopped and looked in my own cart. To explain that, I would have to add, “and I believe that I am John Perry,” bringing in the indexical again. (“The Problem of the Essential Indexical” 35)

‘I’ is a clear example of a *pure* indexical, since the person designated can be singled out without any associated demonstration: in Perry’s words, “designation is ‘automatic’

given meaning and public contextual facts . . . No further intention than that of using the words with their ordinary meaning is relevant” (“Indexicals and Demonstratives” 595).

‘I’ is essential for explaining changes in my behavior: belief that “John Perry is making a mess” will not cause changes in my behavior the same way “I am making a mess” will, unless I also believe that I am John Perry. If we replace ‘I’ for some other kind of expression that does not contain ‘I’, then some of the changes in our behavior become very difficult to explain.

This reasoning by Perry is connected to semantic and epistemic reasons for the claim that ‘I’ is an essential indexical. The semantic reasons are that what we mean by ‘I’ cannot be picked out by other expressions: ‘I’ does not mean ‘the person here now’, because there might be several people here now. ‘I’ does not mean the person to whom you are speaking now, because oftentimes you are not speaking to me. ‘I’ does not mean John Perry, because I am not John Perry. The epistemic reason is that whereas we can immediately know who ‘I’ refers to every time we use it, we do not always know who we are talking about when using other words to refer to myself: A full (nonindexical) description of myself will not tell that the person being described is me, unless I know already that I am the person being described. This is the point of the Rudolf Lingens example by Perry (“Frege on Demonstratives” 21): Rudolf Lingens, an amnesiac, reads a biography of himself in the library, oblivious to the fact that he is the person about which he is reading. The information “I am Rudolf Lingens” is not something he will find in his own biography, but additional knowledge.

Analogous points hold for ‘now’: it is needed in order to explain changes of my behavior. I believe there will be a department meeting at 9 a.m. I sit in my office for a while, until suddenly I stand up and walk toward the conference room. My belief that there will be a meeting at 9 a.m. did not change. What changed was my belief about what time it is *now*. Likewise, there are semantic and epistemic reasons for considering ‘now’ an essential indexical: ‘now’ is not the time shown on my wristwatch, because sometimes it shows the wrong time (i.e., not the time it is *now*). ‘Now’ is not the time I read or utter this sentence, because I might not be reading or uttering anything now, or I might take a long time to finish reading or uttering it (I may get interrupted by something or someone). ‘Now’ is not yesterday plus 24 hours, because that could be any time today. A complete (nonindexical) description of all moments of time will not tell us which moment is now. Surely we can take ‘now’ to be synonymous with ‘the present moment’, but that is just another way of saying ‘now’, and not an elimination of ‘now’ in terms of some other indexical.

Indexicals of direction

Kaplan pointed out that some pure indexicals can also be used as demonstratives. The example he gives (491) is the indexical ‘here’, which is a pure indexical in

I am here

and a demonstrative in

In two weeks, I will be here [pointing at a city on a map].

Likewise, indexicals of direction have both a pure *and* a demonstrative use: 'left' is a pure indexical in

Go out the door, then turn left

and a demonstrative in

The person to my left is John.

In the latter case, 'left' varies with the position and orientation of my body. Hence, an associated demonstration is required for the identification of the direction intended: What I mean by 'left' must be read off from the position and orientation of my body. But in the previous case, the direction 'turn left' requires no associated demonstration. It can be clearly followed even when given out on a piece of paper, no matter how far away the author may be from the person to whom it is addressed.

Pure indexicals of direction are *essential indexicals* in the sense that they cannot be eliminated in favor of other pure indexicals. In particular, they cannot be eliminated in favor of the pure indexicals 'I' and 'now'. There are (i) explanatory, (ii) semantic, and (iii) epistemic reasons for holding this, which are similar to the ones mentioned above for 'I' and 'now':

(i) Upon being given the instruction 'turn left', I will not turn toward 'the direction of the side of my body where my heart is', unless I also believe that my heart is in my *left* side—which brings the indexical 'left' back in again. Likewise for 'turn back': I will not go the way I came from, unless I already believe that going that way is going *back*. Also for 'go up': I will not go against the pull of gravity, unless I believe that going that way is going *up*. My behavior, when I follow directions that were given to me with the use of pure indexicals of direction, cannot be adequately explained without pure indexicals of direction.

(ii) What is said with a pure indexical of direction cannot be said without pure indexicals of direction: 'turn left' does not mean something like 'turn toward the side of your body where your heart is'. On some people, the heart is in the right side of the body. More to the point, I may follow correctly the direction 'turn left' even while traveling by car or bus facing backwards (in which case I should have the vehicle turn toward the right side of my body). Pure indexicals of direction are not tied to the actual position or orientation of our bodies, but to the direction of the movement that led to that point, although while giving out directions we assume that the front of our bodies face toward the direction of movement and that we move in an upright position—directions are given out based on those two assumptions. But those are not assumptions about *me now*, so pure indexicals of direction cannot be eliminated in favor of 'I' and 'now'. Furthermore, those are assumptions built into our uses of (pure) indexicals of direction; hence they are not tantamount to demonstrations on the part of the speaker. The speaker may remain invisible to the hearer without upsetting the understanding of the directions.

(iii) A complete (nonindexical) description of the two sides of my body (or of any body) will not tell us which is right and which is left, unless we already have a standard form or shape which we call right or left.⁴ And if someone points to a place on a map and says 'you are here now', and then points to a different place and says 'and you need to go

here', that information alone will not tell me which direction I ought to go: I also need to know how to orient the map relative to where I am (how to hold the map—which way is right, which is left—so that its layout will match the layout of the place I am in).

The essential indexicals of directions are three in number—one for each spatial dimension. Three suffice, because right/left, up/down, front/back can be defined in terms of each other: the direction opposite to right is left, and so forth. But less than three will not do, as William James noted over a century ago:

If we take a cube and label one side *top*, another *bottom*, a third *front*, and a fourth *back*, there remains no form of words by which we can describe to another person which of the remaining sides is *right* and which is *left*. We can only point and say *here* is right and *there* is left, just as we should say *this* is red and *that* blue. (*The Principles of Psychology*, vol. II, 150)

Unlike the pure indexical 'here'—and other indexicals of location—which can be eliminated in favor of 'I' and 'now' ('here' is just 'the place where I am now'), pure indexicals of direction are as essential as 'I' and 'now'. This indicates that in our conceptual scheme location is not as fundamental as orientation.⁵ And indeed, more often than not, in our spatial relations to the world knowing how to get from here to there seems more important than knowing where we are.

Notes

- 1 See also Evans (*The Varieties of Reference*, chapter 6) and Russell ("Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description") for related arguments.
- 2 In the recent literature, Austin (46 ff.), Martens, and Braun discuss indexicals of direction, but refrain making any claims as to whether they are essential.
- 3 Similar views can be found by Schiffer (201) and Corazza (341); see also Lewis and Chisholm on 'I', and Prior and Gale on 'now'. In later articles Perry seems more reluctant to use the notion of 'essential indexical' (see his "Indexicals and Demonstratives", for example).
- 4 This was a point first made by Kant with his incongruent counterparts arguments: the spatial form of a left hand cannot be identified by concepts alone—an intuition is always needed (see Bernecker "Kant on Spatial Orientation" for more details).
- 5 This point is already explored by a number of authors; I will not dwell on it here, but merely refer the reader to Campbell (*Past, Space, and Self*, chapters 1 and 4), Merleau-Ponty (*Phenomenology of Perception*, part II, chapter 2), and Malpas (131 ff.).

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