

PAVING THE ROAD TO REFERENCE

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When you refer to something demonstratively, what determines the reference, your demonstration or your intention? David Kaplan (1979) used to say the demonstration but in his "Afterthoughts" (1989) he now says the intention. Marga Reimer (1991) thinks he was right the first time. Indeed, she uses as her epigraph his dictum that there are limits to what even the best of intentions can accomplish, and proceeds to offer three counterexamples to what may be called the Intention Thesis (IT). I will argue that Kaplan was right to change his mind: the best of intentions *are* good enough to determine the referent (at least when there is one). But, we must ask, in regard to demonstrative reference, just what are the best of intentions? As we will see, there is more to a referential intention than having something in mind and intending to refer to it. Not just any intention to refer to something is a specifically referential intention.

Kaplan now regards demonstration as playing merely the pragmatic role of facilitating communication, of making clear to the audience what one intends to be referring to. Thus characterized, this role is reminiscent of the role Russell ascribed to uses of ordinary proper names and Donnellan (1966) ascribed to referential uses of definite descriptions, that is, "merely to indicate what we are speaking about" (Russell 1919, p. 175). With demonstratives, according to Kaplan, what plays the semantic role of actually determining the demonstratum and thereby the referent is the speaker's "directing intention," so-called because it both guides the act of demonstration and is targeted at a perceived object. What Reimer objects to is the claim that the intended demonstratum is automatically the actual demonstratum. She argues that something else — or nothing at all — may be the actual demonstratum, in which case the speaker's intention is overridden. This happens, she contends, in her three test cases, which involve, respectively, (1)

demonstrating the wrong object, (2) failing to perceive the intended demonstratum, and (3) failing to demonstrate anything at all. Reimer regards all three as counterexamples to IT and concludes that Kaplan was wrong to demote the act of demonstration from a decisive to a subordinate role.

The crux of my defense of IT will be to explain how in each case the relevant intention is “directing” not just in Kaplan’s sense but in a specifically communicative way. A referential intention is part of a communicative intention, an intention whose distinctive feature is that “its fulfillment consists in its recognition” (Bach and Harnish 1979, p. 15). A referential intention isn’t just any intention to refer to something one has in mind but involves intending one’s audience to identify something as the referent by means of thinking of it in a certain identifiable way (Bach 1987, pp. 49–53). Such an intention is not fulfilled if the audience fails to identify the right individual in the right way, that is, the one intended in the way intended. This is what happens in Reimer’s three examples, for a different reason in each case.

(1) I intend to refer to my keys as I say “These are mine,” but by mistake I grab my officemate’s keys, which are sitting on the desk alongside my own. In using the word “these,” surely I did not refer to my keys. I may have intended to demonstrate and thereby refer to them, but despite my intention what I actually demonstrated and thereby referred to were my officemate’s keys. This is clear from the fact that what I said when I uttered “These are mine” was false. According to Reimer, my officemate misunderstood my intention but he correctly understood my utterance, and it would be absurd of me to insist that I did not *say* that his keys were mine.

But what was my intention, that is, the referential part of my communicative intention? Although I intended to refer to my keys, I didn’t intend my officemate to recognize *that* intention. The intention I intended my officemate to recognize was my intention to refer to the keys I grabbed. My officemate was to identify what I was using the word “these” to refer to by thinking of the keys not as my keys but as the things I grabbed. The act of grabbing them was the only manifest basis, hence the only plausibly intended basis, for him to identify them. That they were my keys was not part of that basis.

(2) In his classic example of a picture of Carnap being replaced by

one of Spiro Agnew, Kaplan pointed to the picture behind him and said, unaware of the switch, “That is a picture of one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century.” Kaplan intended to demonstrate and to refer to Carnap’s picture, but in fact demonstrated and referred to Agnew’s picture instead. He did not say what he intended to say, as indicated by the fact that what he did say, unlike what he intended to say, was patently false.

Clearly it was not Kaplan’s intention to be pointing to Agnew’s picture, but, as I have argued before (Bach 1987, pp. 182–6), he did intend to point to and thereby refer to the picture behind him. Believing this to be Carnap’s picture, he intended to point to and refer to Carnap’s picture, but this was not his referential intention. He intended his audience to identify what he was talking about simply by recognizing his intention to be pointing to the picture behind him. The fact that *he* took this to be a picture of Carnap was not germane to his referential intention, even though he intended to be talking about a certain picture of Carnap. He intended his audience to identify what he was talking about not as Carnap’s picture but as the picture he was pointing to behind him.

(3) Frolicking in the park are several dogs, including Reimer’s dog Fido. Intending to point at and refer to her dog she says “That dog is Fido,” but sudden paralysis prevents her from pointing or making any other demonstrative gesture. Reimer argues that since on Kaplan’s view intention is decisive and demonstration is inessential, a mere aid to communication, he is committed to saying that because of her intention she succeeded in referring to her dog and in saying something true. She contends, however, that no dog was referred to, and no determinate statement was made, precisely because no dog or anything else was being demonstrated. The demonstrative description “That dog” was empty because, contrary to what its use implied, no dog was being demonstrated.

But what is the relevant intention in this case? The relevant one is not her intention to refer to her dog but the intention to refer to the dog she is pointing at. Of course she does intend to refer to her dog, but she does not intend her audience to recognize *that* intention and identify her dog *as* her dog. She intends them to think of it as *the dog she is pointing at*. The trouble is, she has not done what it takes to

enable her audience to think of her dog in this way; she may have intended to refer to her dog, but since she failed to point at it, the relevant intention, her audience-directed intention, is empty, since nothing qualifies as the dog she is pointing at. However, IT does not imply that any reference was made in this case. IT does not say that demonstrative referential intentions are automatically fulfilled but only that they are not trumped by acts of demonstration. IT does not say that such an intention can be fulfilled even if *no* act of demonstration is performed when, as in the example, the fulfillment of this intention requires such an act. After all, the intention in this case is to refer to what is being pointed at.

In none of Reimer's three examples does the act of demonstration override the speaker's referential intention. Instead what happens is that the referential intention unwittingly fails to be about what the speaker has in mind, i.e., has in mind in some other way than the way in which he intends the audience to think of the referent. In case (1) I have my own keys in mind but my referential intention is about the keys I have grabbed, which happen to be my officemate's keys; in (2) Kaplan has Carnap's picture in mind but his referential intention is about the picture behind him, which happens to be Agnew's picture; in (3) Reimer has her dog in mind but her referential intention, to refer to what she is about to point at, is not about anything. In each case the utterance, together with the accompanying gesture (if any), fails to provide the audience with a basis for thinking of the object the speaker has in mind. The reason the act of demonstration does not and cannot override the speaker's referential intention is that the latter *is* the intention to refer to the object being demonstrated. It is precisely because the speaker can be mistaken about which object this is that scenarios like Reimer's can arise, but this does not make them genuine counterexamples to IT.

Counterexamples aside, IT may ring untrue because it appears to give too much power to intentions. In general, as Humpty Dumpty appreciated, you can't mean anything you want by what you say, though of course there are various ways in which what you mean can depart from what you say (Bach and Harnish 1979, ch. 4). IT might seem to imply that one could utter any old thing and gesture in any old way and still manage to refer to whatever one has in mind. This would be

absurd, but IT implies no such thing. To think that it does would be to misunderstand the nature of referential intentions and their relationship to the utterances used to express them. You do not say something and then, as though by an inner decree (an intention), determine what you are using it to refer to. You do not just have something "in mind" and hope that your audience is a good mind reader. Rather, you decide to refer to something and try to select an expression whose utterance will enable your audience, under the circumstances, to identify what you are referring to. These circumstances are comprised of mutually believed matters of fact, such as what is in plain view to both of you, including any gestures on your part, as well as shared background information (Bach and Harnish 1979, pp. 5–6).

Let us apply these points to variations on Reimer's third scenario. She observes that "had I been able to anticipate my sudden inability to issue any sort of demonstration, I would thereby have been able to anticipate that 'that dog' and 'the dog I'm pointing to' would both be empty, and so wouldn't have employed either" (p. 195). The reason, plainly, is that she realizes that using either description would not have enabled the audience to identify the dog she had in mind. If Fido were the only dog around, she would have succeeded in referring to her dog, demonstration or no demonstration. Similarly, if there were many dogs around but Fido was the only spotted one, she would have succeeded in referring to her dog had she said "That spotted dog is Fido." Finally, she could have used "that dog" to refer to her dog without Fido even being around if her dog had just been mentioned in the conversation. In each case there would be an identifiable way for her audience to think of, by taking her to be intending them to think of, a certain dog. The successful use of a demonstrative phrase like "that dog" does not require something being pointed at or even something conspicuous by its presence — having just been mentioned will do. Being pointed at is but one way of being salient, in suitable circumstances a way of being salient enough that a speaker can reasonably expect his audience, and his audience can reasonably take him to expect them, to identify that individual as the referent.

So there is really nothing special theoretically about demonstrative reference. When you use a demonstrative phrase like "that dog" to refer, you may or may not, depending on whether something is salient

because you are pointing at it or salient for some other reason, intend your audience to single it out as the referent by identifying it as what you are pointing at. If that is your referential intention, then what you are pointing at is what you are referring to — even if you had something else in mind. The Intention Thesis does deny that your act of demonstration can trump your referential intention, but it does not deny that this intention can incorporate that act.

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