Demonstratives

Jeff Speaks

PHIL 43916

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The problem of explaining the character of 'that' is the problem of saying which function from contexts to intensions determines the semantic value of a demonstrative in a context. There have been three main approaches to this problem: theories which focus on the associated demonstration, theories which focus on salience of objects in contexts, and theories which focus on speaker intentions.

I'll proceed under the assumption that demonstratives, like names, have objects as their semantic values. But this assumption can be, and has been, questioned. King (2001) points out that many uses of 'that' and 'this', especially in complex demonstratives, seem to work more like quantifier expressions, like 'the' and 'every.' For example:

> Every parent dreads that moment when his child leaves for college.

I'm going to set this sort of data to the side for present purposes — the problems we will discuss would also arise in this sort of framework, but will be easier to present if we are treating demonstratives as functioning more like names.

1 DEMONSTRATION THEORIES

The simplest version of the demonstration theory identifies demonstrations with pointing gestures, and says that the character of a demonstrative is the function from contexts to

objects which, for any context, delivers the object at which the speaker of the context is pointing — roughly, the first object met by a straight line which extends the finger or arm of the pointing gesture. Here are some of the main problems this sort of theory faces:

1. The theory is insufficiently general, because there appear to be uses of demonstratives accompanied by no demonstration. (E.g., saying 'Wake that student up' with no accompanying pointing gesture when one student in a small classroom is openly snoring during discussion.)

2. The theory can't handle cases of deferred reference, in which we manage to refer to someone by pointing at something else. King (2014) gives the example of saying 'he' while pointing at the chair of an absent student to refer to the student. One might try to argue that cases like this are outliers, and deserving of separate treatment; but, given the frequency with which they occur, this looks a bit ad hoc. (Common examples: pointing at pictures to refer to the things pictured, pointing at maps to refer to locations.)

3. As Reimer (1992) notes, when we point at something we always point at many things (the person, his shirt, the button, . . .). Hence the character provided by our simple demonstration theory never seems to deliver a single object as the content of a demonstrative in a context.

Suppose that we tried to solve these problems by developing a more sophisticated demonstration theory. How might that go?

2 Salience theories

According to salience theories, what a demonstrative in a context refers to has something to do with which objects are salient in that context. Pointing gestures, on this view, are just one way of making an object salient. In other cases, as in the case of the snoring student, the object is already salient, and no pointing gesture is required.

Intuitive as the theory is, it would be good to have some explanation of what salience amounts to. Here's how the notion is explicated on Allyson Mount's version of the view:

> 'By saying that something is salient, I mean that it is the focus of perceptual or cognitive attention. Salience, on this view, is not some objective feature that can be determined independently of the mental states of conversational participants; it is essentially a mind-dependent matter. An object is mutually recognized as maximally salient by conversational participants when all interlocutors have focused their attention on it, and are aware that they have all focused their attention on it. Thus my claim is that a demonstrative refers to the object mutually recognized as maximally salient. When there is no such object, the demonstrative does not refer.' (Mount (2008), 154-5)

But this faces an obvious problem, which is that in the standard case there will be many objects on whom the conversational participants have focused their attention (and

mutually recognize each other as so doing). Recall the example of pointing at the chair to refer to the absent student. It is plausible to say that the pointing gesture made the absent student the focus of cognitive attention. But it obviously also makes the chair the focus of cognitive (and perceptual) attention. So in virtue of what is the student, rather than the chair, the content of the demonstrative? Salience theories seem to give no answer.

One might try to get around this problem by saying that the content of a demonstrative is always the *most* salient object in the relevant context. But this will just lead to incorrect results. Suppose that you and I are trapped in a room with a tiger. The tiger will be, one would think, the most salient object in our conversational context. But, despite this, we will be able to use demonstratives to pick out other objects in the room.

3   INTENTION THEORIES

The simplest intention theory is the following:

> *Simple Intention Theory*
> The content of a demonstrative d in a context c is the F iff the speaker of c intends that the F be the semantic value of d in c.

2 points in favor of this sort of theory: (i) it handles all of the cases discussed so far, and (ii) it is independently plausible that the characters of other sorts of context-sensitive expressions will need to make use of facts about the intentions of speakers.

More complex intention theories agree with the Simple Intention Theory that speaker intentions are a necessary condition on content, but deny that they are also sufficient. So an intention theory other than the Simple Intention Theory will be of the form

> The content of a demonstrative d in a context c is the F iff
> (1) the speaker intends the F to be the semantic value of d in c, and
> (2) ...
> ...

3.1   A problem about the contents of the relevant intentions

Here is a very simple objection to theories of this sort: they require that competent users of demonstratives have intentions about the semantic values of the expressions they use. But my three year old is such a competent user, and she has no views about the semantic values of anything.

Is this a serious problem?

3.2 An epistemic objection

Here is an objection to intention theories from Gauker (2008):

> Hearers have little access to what people have in mind apart from the interpretation of what they say. So interpretation would be a problem that hearers could not solve if they had to know what a speaker intended in order to . . . interpret the speakers utterance. . . . Someone might hold that if the context specifies that "that" refers to x, then that is because in saying "that" the speaker intended to refer x . . . My objection to this theory is that it renders the reference of demonstratives inaccessible to hearers. In order to identify the referent of a demonstrative the hearer will have to figure out what the speaker intended to refer to. But apart from an independent interpretation of the speakers words, hearers will typically be in no position to do that.

How should the intention theorist respond?

3.3 The problem of insufficient intentions

Here is a quite different objection to our Simple Intention Theory, from King (2014):

> . . . the intention account seems very strained in cases in which a speaker has the relevant intention but mounts either a poor demonstration or no demonstration. For example, suppose I am sitting on Venice beach on a crowded holiday looking south. Hundreds if not thousands of people are in sight. I fix my attention on a woman in the distance and, intending to talk about her and gesturing vaguely to the south, say 'She is athletic.' You, of course, have no idea who I am talking about. It seems quite implausible in such a case to say that I succeeded in securing the woman in question as the value of my demonstrative simply because I was perceiving her, and intending to talk about her.

Is King right that 'she' lacks a semantic value in this example? How could the our theory be modified to give the result that 'she' does not have a semantic value in this example?

3.4 The problem of conflicting intentions

The most serious problem for intention theories that there are cases in which speakers have more than one intention with respect to the reference of a demonstrative, and these intentions can sometimes point in different directions. The classic example here is due to Kaplan (1970):

Carnap & Agnew

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'Suppose that without turning and looking I point to the place on my wall which has long been occupied by a picture of Rudolf Carnap and I say: [That] is a picture of one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century. But unbeknownst to me, someone has replaced my picture of Carnap with one of Spiro Agnew. ...I have said of a picture of Spiro Agnew that it pictures one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century. And my speech and demonstration suggest no other natural interpretation ...No matter how hard I intend Carnap's picture, I do not think it reasonable to call the content of my utterance true.'

One might think that this shows that the Simple Intention Theory just fails to provide even a necessary condition for reference; after all, isn't this just a case in which a speaker refers to something without having intended to refer to it?

But this overlooks the fact that the speaker in this scenario has more than one intention. He does of course intend to refer to the picture of Carnap; but he also intends to refer to the picture at which he is pointing. It's just that in this case the second intention wins out, and fixes the reference of the demonstrative.

Let's introduce a little bit of terminology which will make it easier to talk about cases of this sort. When a speaker intends a demonstrative in a context to refer to the F, I will say that the property of being the unique F is (or is one of) the speaker's *intended conditions*. If a speaker, as in the case of Carnap & Agnew, has more than one intended condition, and one of those wins out by fixing the reference of the demonstrative, I will say that that intended condition *trumps* the others. (We can also talk interchangeably about intentions trumping other intentions – one intention will trump another iff its associated intended condition trumps the other associated intended conditions. In some cases it will be easiest to focus on the intentions, and in other cases on the intended conditions.)

Though opinions differ about the right thing to say about the case of Carnap & Agnew, we can all agree that in that scenario the demonstrative does not refer to *both* the picture of Carnap and the picture of Agnew. This is all we need to see that the Simple Intention Theory is false, and that we need to move to a complex intention theory which adds at least one further condition on reference to the simple theory — it will be a theory of the form

> The content of a demonstrative d in a context c is the F iff
> (1) the speaker intends the F to be the value of d in c, and
> (2) for any other intended condition G such that the $F \neq$ the G, F trumps G
> ...

Then what we need to fill this out is a theory of trumping: an account of the conditions (if any) under which one intention trumps another.

Let's discuss three general sorts of ways of providing such a theory.

3.4.1 No tolerance theories

King (2014) is tempted by the no tolerance view, which we might express as the following very simple theory of trumping:

(a) Nothing trumps anything

This delivers the result that the speaker in Carnap & Agnew fails to refer to anything, since, given (a), neither intention will satisfy condition (2) of the formulation above. But other examples of conflicting intentions show, I think, that the no tolerance theory simply cannot be right. One well-known case is due to Reimer (1991):

> Suppose, for instance, that I suddenly realize that I have left my keys on the desk my (shared) office. I return to my office, where I find the desk occupied by my officemate. I then spot my keys, sitting there on the desk, alongside my officemate's keys. I then make a grab for my keys, saying just as I mistakenly grab my officemate's keys, "These are mine."

It is quite difficult to deny, I think, that in this case 'these' refers to keys mistakenly grabbed. Here's another case which is perhaps even clearer on this score:

> *The carnival*
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> I'm at a carnival where, for a fee, I can choose from among a large number of plastic balls, one of which contains $100. The person running the game asks me which one I want and, pointing, I say, 'That ball.' I intend to refer to the ball at which I am pointing (say, ball #58), and of course also intend to refer to the ball which contains $100. But it turns out that another ball – ball #113 – contains the cash. The intentions conflict – but it is clear that the content of my utterance of 'that ball' is ball #58.

These cases show that we need a theory of trumping which sometimes actually delivers the result that one intended condition trumps another.

3.4.2 Special intention theories

The simplest way to provide such a theory would be to single out a class of always-trumping intentions. But which class?

De re intentions

When thinking about the case of the carnival just described, one might think that the relevant difference is that the intended condition associated with my pointing gesture is

directly about the particular ball, whereas the other is merely descriptive ('the winning ball, whatever it is'). This might suggest:

(*b*) De re intended conditions always trump all of the others.

But we can imagine a variant of the above case in which the speaker has a prior acquaintance with the winning ball, and a de re intention to refer to it. Perhaps, upon his prior acquaintance, the speaker named the ball 'Larry.' He will then have the de re intention to refer to Larry, and we would then have a case of conflicting de re intentions. Both of them can't trump the other.

Further, and even worse, in the original Carnap/Agnew case, we seem to have a descriptive intended condition trumping a de re intended condition.

Demonstrative intentions

But perhaps the category of de re intentions is simply the wrong choice for the class of always-trumping intentions. One notable feature of the cases of conflicting intentions discussed so far is that demonstrations seem to play some special role; intentions to refer to thing one is demonstrating seem always to trump other sorts of referential intentions. This seems to explain our intuitions in the cases of Carnap & Agnew, the carnival, and Reimer's example of the keys. On this view, the trumping intention will be, for some property F, the intention to refer to the *F* in the direction of the gesture. This view might be stated as follows:

(*c*) Demonstrative intended conditions always trump all of the others.

This proposal seems initially to be open to an objection which can be brought out by the following case:

> *Incompetent pointing*
>
> A student in the front row of Philosophy 101 is openly napping. I point at him, saying 'Somebody wake that student up.' I intend 'that student' to demonstrate the sleeping student, and intend 'that student' to demonstrate the student at which I am pointing. But in fact my finger is aimed just over the student's left shoulder, in such a way that a line drawn in the direction indicated by my finger would intersect a student sitting in the second row.

My demonstrative intention appears to be the intention to refer to the student at which I am pointing. But in this case that demonstrative intention appears to be trumped by the intention to refer to the sleeping student.

Reply: the speaker does not have the intention to refer to the student at which she is pointing — she does not think that her pointing gesture is that accurate. Instead she intends to refer to the sleeping student in the vicinity of her pointing gesture.

But this solution is just a stopgap. In some cases, we intend to refer to the F in the direction of our pointing gesture, and yet our demonstrative refers to something which is not F. For such an example, imagine that the student who appeared to be sleeping was merely pretending to nap, as a way of protesting the less than exciting lecture. 'That student' would still refer to the faux-sleeping student, despite the fact that that student would not be the sleeping student in the rough vicinity of my pointing. This would then be a case in which, contra (c), the demonstrative intention is trumped.

In other cases, I can have conflicting intentions, both of which are, in Reimer's sense, secondary intentions. That is, I might intend to refer to the F in the direction of my pointing gesture and intend to refer to the G in the direction of my pointing gesture, in a situation in which the $F \neq$ the G. To generate such a case, just imagine that next to the student pretending to be sleeping, there is another student sleeping with eyes wide open. I presumably intend to refer to the sleeping student in the direction of my pointing gesture, and also intend to refer to the student with eyes shut in the direction of my pointing gesture. This will be a case of conflicting intentions which are secondary, in Reimer's sense. And if we can have conflicting secondary intentions, we can't solve the problem of conflicting intentions by claiming that secondary intentions always trump.

Indeed, it seems like any case of conflicting intentions which involves at least one demonstrative intention will be a case of conflicting demonstrative intentions. Just as the speaker intends to refer to the picture at which he is pointing, he presumably also intends to refer to the picture of Carnap at which he is pointing.

3.4.3 Relational theories

It looks tough to find a special class of always-trumping intentions. Better, perhaps, to look to the relations which hold between the relevant intentions in particular contexts.

Salience

One idea is that we could bring the resources of salience theories of demonstrative reference to bear on the present problem for intention theories. The basic idea would be that, in cases of conflicting intentions, the trumping intended condition is the one which is satisfied by an object which is salient in that context.

Let's see how this looks if we apply Mount's account of salience:

(d) F trumps G iff the F is the focus of the cognitive attention of the conversation participants (and mutually known to be so) and the G is not.

Given the foregoing, one problem here is probably obvious: there can be cases of conflicting intentions which are such that the objects of both intended conditions are salient in the conversation. The example of the carnival is such a case, and the example of Carnap & Agnew can be turned into one if we imagine that the picture of Carnap is not gone from the room, but simply moved to a different location to the right of the speaker.

A second problem is that this will give the wrong result in cases in which both the speaker

and the audience have false beliefs about their environment. Here is such a case:

> *Mutual hallucination*
> You and I are having a conversation while jointly experiencing a quite convincing mutual hallucination of your cat 'Fluffy.' Pointing at what I take to be the Fluffy, I say 'That cat ...'

This may not at first seem like a case of conflicting intentions, but it is. I intend to refer to Fluffy, but also intend to refer to the cat at which I am pointing. The first intention singles out Fluffy; the second intention singles out nothing. Given that Fluffy is the object of our cognitive attention, (d) dictates that the first intention trumps. But, intuitively, this is a case of reference failure, which means that the second intention (whose intended condition picks out nothing) trumps.

A third problem – which is also a problem with simple salience theories – is that this makes the conditions on demonstrative reference much too strong. For suppose that my audience is napping, or drunk, or distracted – they might well not be focusing on the intended referent of the demonstrative. But this bad luck on my part is surely not sufficient for reference failure.

One might try to get around all of these problems by modifying (d) in certain ways. In response to the first problem, we might require not just that the object be salient to the conversational participants, but also that the conversational participants identify the object as the content of the demonstrative in the context. In response to the second and third problems, we might focus less on what the actual audience does than on what an idealized audience would do. Incorporating both modifications gives us

(e) The F trumps the G iff were the conversational participants ideal (i.e., attentive, competent with the language, not experiencing hallucinations, ...), they would identify the F as the content of d in c.

But suppose that I am trying to teach someone how to interpret 'that' in arbitrary contexts. I can hardly help them along by telling them that they should take 'that' to have the content which an ideal interpreter would take it to have. I'd have to, in addition, give them the rule which an ideal interpreter would follow. But a rule of this sort is exactly what (e) was supposed to provide.

Explanatory relations

A different and more promising approach begins with the thought that a subject's intentions are usually not one-off things, but rather are structured together into plans. So, for example, in the case of Carnap & Agnew, the speaker intends to refer to the picture of Carnap. Because he has this intention, plus the (false) belief that this picture is behind him, he forms the intention to point, and refer to the picture at which he is pointing. We might, following King (2013), represent this explanatory chain as follows:

> intention to refer to the picture of Carnap (+ beliefs about he environment)
> $\rightsquigarrow$ intention to refer to the picture at which he is pointing

And, in general, the user of a demonstrative who has several referential intentions wil be such that those intentions are structured into a plan of the following sort:

intention to refer to the F (+ some other mental states) $\rightsquigarrow$ intention to refer to the G (+ some other mental states) $\rightsquigarrow$ . . .

But this chain will come to an end at some point, and there will presumably be some last referential intention which stands in the closest relation to the actual utterance of the demonstrative in the context. Following King, call this intention, the one that comes last in the structured chain of intentions, the *controlling intention*. King suggests, in effect, the following view:

(f) Controlling intentions always trump all the other intentions.

As we've already seen, this seems to fit the case of Carnap & Agnew; and, for much the same reason, it seems to help with the cases of the keys and the carnival.

But in the end this faces some of the same problems as (c). In cases where the subject points in the direction of the object to which she intends to refer, the subject's controlling intention will typically be a demonstrative intention. But recall the case of the student who seems to be, but is not, sleeping. I might see him with his eyes closed, and form the de re intention to refer to that student. Because I have this de re intention, I might point in his direction and form the intention to refer to the sleeping student in the vicinity of my pointing gesture.

intention to refer to that student (de re) (+ some other mental states) $\rightsquigarrow$ intention to refer to the sleeping student in the vicinity of my pointing gesture (+ some other mental states) $\rightsquigarrow$ utterance

Here the controlling intention seems to be the intention to refer to the sleeping student in the vicinity of my pointing gesture. But, even if the student is not sleeping, the demonstrative still refers to her.

How might the proponent of (f) respond? A tempting reply is to say that the speaker intends, not just to refer to the sleeping student in the vicinity of his pointing gesture, but also to the student who *appears to be sleeping* in the vicinity of that gesture. And if the student does appear to be sleeping, she will satisfy the intended condition, and we will get the result we want.

But there are two problems with this line of response. The first is that the speaker may have this intention, but also may not; one does not in general have to have intentions about how things appear. I might intend to drink a beer without having the intention to drink something which appears to be a beer. And whether or not we the speaker does have this extra intention about appearances seems irrelevant to the reference of the demonstrative in this context.

The second problem is that, even if we assume that the speaker does have this extra intention, that is not enough to save (f), for we need to show, not just that the speaker has the appears-to-be-sleeping intention, but also that this is the speaker's controlling intention. And it seems pretty clear in this case that it need not be. One doesn't first form the intention to refer to the sleeping student and then, on the basis of this intention plus some other mental states, decide to form the intention to refer to the student who appears to be sleeping.

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