

Week 8: Descriptive Indexicals

Sometimes – notably in modal contexts – deictic terms do not behave like their true selves, but like definite descriptions describing the role played by their ostensible referents in the situation of utterance.

There is no generally accepted account of this.

Below, the deictic pronoun is arguably interpreted as if it were a definite description

(on a standard, *de dicto* reading): something like *the person who rang the doorbell*,
the participants at the Davos World Economic Forum, *the occupant*.

- (1) (You shouldn't have opened the door!) I could have been a burglar!
- (2) (I said,) 'in ten years' time, half of you will be women.'
- (3) ... or he was hoping you were a woman and was going to force his way in.

Note that (1) also has a plain reading: 'My sister is a burglar, so I could easily have become one myself', 'I'm so deft at picking locks, I'd have made a good burglar'.

We could try using **diagonalization** to bring out the right reading.

Diagonalization is an operation on characters (meanings; functions from situations to functions from situations to extensions) that makes the situation of evaluation play the role of the situation of utterance:

$$\Delta(\llbracket \alpha \rrbracket) = \lambda i \lambda j \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^i(j)$$

First, let us see what diagonalization can be good for in a simple case: (4) as uttered by the Wolf.

- (4) Open the door! I am your mother!

Arguably, the meaning of "I am your mother" maps this utterance situation to a proposition which is false in all evaluation situations – i.e., to the empty proposition. But if we resort to the **diagonal proposition**, effectively reinterpreting "I" as "the speaker", we obtain an informative statement (our utterance situation is s_0 , rows correspond to utterance situations and columns to evaluation situations):



"I could have been the Wolf!"

Geoffrey Nunberg (1993)
"Indexicality and Deixis",
Linguistics and Philosophy 16:
1–43

Diagonalization (and
actualization, see week 9) can
also be defined as an operator
on expressions.

Cf. Zimmermann (2012:
2374–2382)

	s_0	s_1	s_2	s_3
s_0	0	0	0	0
s_1	1	1	1	1
s_2	0	0	0	0
s_3	1	1	1	1

The effect of diagonalization is to project the diagonal to the horizontal. Returning to (1):

If we take the argument proposition of $\llbracket \text{could} \rrbracket^i(j)$ to be $\Delta(\llbracket I \text{ am a burglar} \rrbracket)^i$, that is, $\lambda j^* \llbracket I \text{ am a burglar} \rrbracket^i(j^*)$, we get close to the right reading: there is a possible situation k (accessible from j) such that ($\text{time}(k) = \text{time}(j)$) and) the speaker of k is a burglar in k .

Close, but not close enough: how do we know there is a speaker in k ? In fact, accessible situations where the person who rang the doorbell is a burglar are not likely to have a speaker, or if they do, it is not likely to be the burglar.

Elbourne (2008) develops a theory where a pronoun like *I* acts like a definite article with a covert argument $R(x)$ where R is a contextually salient relation and x is the speaker; its content becomes, relative to i ,

- λj the individual that has the salient property in j that the speaker of i has in i .

Normally, R is set to identity, and then the content reduces to λj the speaker of i .

Food for further thought:

Lakoff (1968), citing James McCawley of UChicago:

(5) I dreamed that I was Brigitte Bardot and that I kissed me.

Nikita Khrushchev said to the Central Committee in 1964:

(6) I understand that my role doesn't exist anymore, but if I were you, I wouldn't
(6) dismiss me entirely.



...and so should you:
give the big piece to you



and the small one to me



...and so should you: give the
big piece to **the receiver** and
the small one to **the sender**

Elbourne, Paul (2008)
"Demonstratives as Individual
Concepts", *Linguistics and
Philosophy* 31: 409–466.

Percus and Sauerland (2003),
Anand (2007)

Kamholz (2012)