

Non-referential Uses of “I” and Its Perspectival Character*

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Abstract. The English “I” is widely held as a well-behaved Kaplanian indexical that has a directly-referential content and a character which implies immunity to self-misidentification. In this paper I present uses of “I” outside attitudinal contexts that are not directly referential yet exhibit immunity to self-misidentification. They include uses of “I” for simulation and for counterfactual self-portrait. I argue that they (i) challenge the non-shiftability and the rigidity arguments for the direct reference view, and (ii) require a revision of the character of “I” to reflect the sensitivity of its content to the perspective from which the speaker identifies herself.

1 Introduction

Kaplan’s two-dimensional semantics for indexicals such as “I” “here” and “now” are designed to address two semantic features that purportedly characterise the uses of these expressions: (a) direct reference and (b) cognitive significance in terms of first-person access to the referent. ([5]) For example, the occurrence of “I” in Lim’s utterance of (1) is directly referential, in that it contributes its referent at the context of utterance, namely Lim, to the proposition expressed.

(1) Lim: I am a guitarist.

Moreover, “I” in (1) yields a first-person access to its referent for the speaker, so that Lim cannot fail to recognise that he himself is a guitarist, whereas such a failure of self-identification is possible if Lim refers to himself by another term such as his name or a description he uniquely satisfies. ([14]) Consequently, Lim’s “I”-thoughts directly inform his actions, whereas *ceteris paribus*, his thoughts about himself expressed in other co-referential terms may fail to elicit those actions. Immunity to self-misidentification and the ensuing immediate connection to one’s own actions are generally attributed to the cognitive significance of “I”.

Kaplan captures the directly referential status and the cognitive significance of “I” and other indexicals in terms of the content/character dichotomy. Roughly, the content of an indexical is an element at a context of utterance, whereas the character

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encodes the conceptual role played by that element at the context. Consider “I” again. On the one hand, the content of an occurrence of “I” is just the individual speaker at a context, hence satisfying direct reference. On the other, that individual plays the *role* of the speaker at the context. ([15]) In general, the role of a speaker is such that when one is speaking, unless one is unconscious or insane, one cannot mistake anyone else as the speaker. Hence, filling in the role of the speaker normally implies having first-person access to oneself. By specifying that an occurrence of “I” refers to the individual that fills in the speaker role, the character of “I” yields a first-person access to its referent that guarantees immunity to self-misidentification.

Subsequent discussions have revealed that indexicals do not always behave in the way Kaplan envisaged, to witness “here” “now” in recorded messages (e.g. [16, 20]), first-person indexicals in languages such as Amharic (e.g. [19]), “I” embedded in attitude reports (e.g. [21]), etc. Nevertheless, outside attitudinal contexts, the English first-person indexicals, abbreviated as “I” throughout this paper, are widely held as a well-behaved paradigm (e.g. [1, 4]). In this paper I discuss attested occurrences of “I” outside attitudinal contexts that are not directly referential yet exhibit immunity to self-misidentification, such as (2) and (3), and expound the challenges they present to the Kaplanian dictum on “I”.

- (2) That’s the supply chain, and its labyrinthine totality is designed to make the satisfaction of consumer desire as frictionless as possible. *I want that ! Click.*
A couple days later, a package arrives on your doorstep.
 - (3) If I had been a sighted person, I may not have achieved any less; however, I would not have been me. I would have been someone totally different. Apart from visiting different countries, I have had the opportunity to do a sky dive as well as drive a racing car. If I could see, I may look at the possible dangers in front of me and avoid these things altogether.
- (2) involves a use of “I” to simulate the mentality of a certain type of individuals, i.e. a consumer who takes to online shopping to instantly fulfil her impulsion, whereas in (3), some occurrences of “I” refer not to the speaker’s actual person, but to the person she counterfactually becomes. Call the former *simulated uses* of “I” and the latter *counterfactual uses* of “I”.

Simulated uses of “I” are widespread. They enable the speaker to engage with others’ point of view, be it the targeted reader’s or someone else’s, and predict, recall, discuss, or evaluate their dispositions and/or behaviours, as in (4) and (5).

- (4) A look at some of the unworn and unloved monsters that lurk inside many a woman’s closet:
The Where-Do-I-Wear-This Cocktail Dress
The I-Thought-It-Was-My-Style Biker Jacket
- (5) As those feelings of exclusion persist, though, the behaviors may become even

more detrimental to the organization – lying on expense forms, drinking on the job. A sense of “my boss has mistreated me, coworkers have mistreated me, so I’m going to get them back,” may prevail. These notions, obviously, can lead to serious negative impacts for organizations.

When the speaker simulates someone else, she cannot be mistaken about the identity of her target of simulation. For example, the speaker in (5) cannot deduce that someone’s boss has mistreated him/her, but wonder if that person is identical to the one she simulates. This is because the identity of the target of simulation is constituted by the properties attributed to it in the sentence that expresses the simulation and the surrounding discourse. Thus, the speaker in (5) simulates an employee who feels excluded, mistreated by his boss and colleagues, inclined to take revenge on them, and so on. If (i) the person the speaker transports herself into in simulation is descriptively given and requires no independent identification, and (ii) “I” in simulated uses refers to the target of simulation, it is not directly referential but displays immunity to self-misidentification.

Counterfactual uses of “I” are common, too. They enable the speaker to detach from her actual perspective to reflect on it and/or to imagine what life would be like from a different perspective, as in (6).

- (6) Would I have been the person I am today, holding the perspectives and values I have today, had I been born in the past? Everything I know and think is the product of modern civilization. ...Had I been born in any other time, I would not have been me. I would have been shaped with different values, socialized to different norms, given a different perspective.

In (3) and (6), the clause in (7) makes perfect sense, meaning roughly that the person the speaker counterfactually becomes, given a different perspective shaped by relevant counterfactual conditions, is not identical to the person she actually is, viz. the person embodying her actual perspective.

- (7) I would not have been me.

Were the occurrences of “I” directly referential, (7) would not make sense, in the same way that (8) does not make sense. ([6])

- (8) Hesperus would not have been Hesperus.

Just as there is no possible circumstance such that Hesperus is not identical to itself, there is no possible circumstance such that the actual speaker is not identical to that speaker. Yet the sense in which (7) conveys in (3) and (6) concerns not the actual speaker’s objective identity, but the fluidity of her subjective identity, depending on the perspective she embodies (see §2.2). Such an intuitive reading of (7) goes against the directly referential status of “I”.

The contrast between (7)-(8) can be further brought out by an analogous contrast

between proper names and the first-person pronoun in dream reports contexts. In Lakoff's ([8]) celebrated example, "I dreamt I was Brigitte Bardot and I kissed me", "I" in the embedded clause intuitively refers to Bardot, the persona that the speaker identifies with in the dream.¹ In contrast, "I dreamt that Biden was Trump and he kissed him" seems not to have a natural counterpart reading, to the effect that the Trump-becoming Biden kissed the actual Biden. In general, identity shifting seems much harder to come by when two proper names are juxtaposed. It is implausible to imagine Biden *being* Trump, while it is relatively easy to imagine (myself) being Biden, meaning literally that the speaker adopts Biden's point of view, or puts herself in Biden's shoes point of view.

More generally, proper names are used from the third-person perspective for other reference which does not allow for subjective other-reference.² Assuming that "Biden" refers to Biden, my imagination cannot shift its reference subjectively to Trump. In contrast, "I" is used from the first-person perspective for self-reference, which allows for self-identification that (momentarily) diverges from the actual self. Assuming that "I" refers to me, my imagination could, in the right kind of dreams, shift its reference subjectively to Brigitte Bardot. In this sense, the reference of "I" could pick out the self subjectively identified, namely the person whose perspective one momentarily adopts, as well as picking out, in standard cases, the self objectively identified *qua* the actual speaker. In contrast, the reference of a proper name may not have such a dichotomy.

Nonetheless, just as the speaker cannot be mistaken about her actual person, she cannot be mistaken about the person she counterfactually becomes. In (3) for example, the speaker cannot deduce that some sighted person may look at the high altitude and refrain from skydiving, but wonder whether that person is identical to the one she counterfactually becomes. This is because the identity of her counterfactual self is determined by the properties she attributes to it in the imagination ([11, p. 60]). If (i) the counterfactual self is intentionally stipulated and requires no independent identification ([17, p. 199]), and (ii) "I" in counterfactual uses refers to the speaker's counterfactual self, it exhibits immunity to self-misidentification.

In the next section I argue that simulated and counterfactual uses of "I" challenge respectively the non-shiftability and the rigidity arguments Kaplan submits for the direct reference view on "I". In §3 I outline a revision of the character and content of "I" that accommodates the cases at hand.

To forestall an objection before moving on, the above cases cannot be dismissed as non-literal uses of "I" which fall outside the scope of the Kaplanian view. Literal-

¹See Ninan ([12]) for further discussion on the reference of "I" in counterfactual attitude reports. The counterfactual uses of "I" discussed here differ from Ninan's in that here the counterfactual self is clearly descriptively given.

²Except for imposter uses, see [3].

ness is a delicate topic that hinges on big issues in the semantics/pragmatics interface. Here I mention two points that justify the relevance of the data. First, on pain of circularity, one cannot relegate these cases to non-literal uses on the sheer ground that they are not directly referential. Second, while a more literal paraphrase is usually available for non-literal uses of language like metaphor or irony, it is not forthcoming for the cases at hand. Replacing “I” in simulated uses with any other term destroys the self-oriented content of the simulation, while substituting “I” in counterfactual uses with the more elaborate “the person I am” or “the person I imagines to be” merely reintroduces the critical “I” whose directly referential status is under debate. I now turn to the two challenges these cases pose to direct reference.

2 Two Challenges to Direct Reference

2.1 Challenge to non-shiftability

Kaplan famously claimed no operator can shift the context-of-utterance-bound interpretation of an indexical without sneaking in a quotational device. ([5, p. 511]) In particular, the apparent non-shiftability of the English “I” in non-quotational environments has been upheld as archetypal evidence for its directly referential status. At first glance, simulated uses of “I” appear to be just a type of quotational occurrences of “I” that should not threaten the thesis of direct reference. However, they are importantly different from standard quotational occurrences of “I” in just those respects that make the latter, but not the former, non-threatening.

An occurrence of the first-person indexical in quotation usually has a shifted interpretation. Thus, “me” in (9) designates Bush, rather than the reporter.

(9) Bush said that the enemy “misunderestimated me”. ([9])

Nonetheless, according to Kaplan, the shift induced by quotation is “harmless” ([5, p. 511]), because quotation does not “control the *character* of the indexicals within its scope” (p. 510, my emphasis). That is, the use of the quotation marks indicates that an indexical is being *mentioned*, rather than *used*. Hence, part of the truth-conditional import brought by standard quotation is the meta-linguistic reference to the quoted material. Hence, (9) cannot be true unless “misunderestimated me” was uttered. Moreover, when a meta-linguistic reference is made to an indexical token, it usually invokes the original context in which it was tokened. For Kaplan, “this amounts to changing its character”. ([5]) That is, the linguistic meaning (i.e. character) of the quoted material is now deferred to the original context. Hence, (9) may be paraphrased as (9’). ([9])

(9’) Bush said that the enemy did what he referred to as “misunderestimated me”.

In (9’), both the character and content of the non-word “misunderestimated” and those

of the indexical “me” are deferred to Bush’s context of utterance. Therein, the linguistic meaning Bush associated with “misunderestimated” fixes its content; *likewise*, the linguistic meaning Bush associated with “me” determines its content. In mixed quotation such as (9), the quoted material contributes both the meta-linguistic reference and the deferred content to the proposition(s) communicated. While the exact truth-conditional profile of mixed quotation is highly debatable, virtually everyone agrees that the meaning of the quoted material is deferred. ([2], overview) Now *because* standard quotation shifts the interpretation of an indexical by way of (i) metalinguistic reference and (ii) deference of its *character and content* to another context, the shift does not result from a manipulation of the variable encoded in its *ordinary* Kaplanian character. In this way, quotation exercises no control on the character, and is thus harmless.

However, the shifted interpretation in simulated uses of “I”, even when they are marked by quotational marks, does not conform to the key features of standard quotation which would make the shift harmless.

First, simulation does not trigger meta-linguistic reference. For example, in her simulation of an excluded employee, the speaker in (5) need not, and usually does not, reproduce the exact words that have been used by particular employees to air their dissatisfaction. Hence, the truth of (5) does not require the material enclosed in the quotation marks to have been uttered. Rather, the simulation involves a presentation, *in the speaker’s own words*, of roughly the same kind of thoughts that an excluded employee would hold, “roughly the same” so that the simulating thought sufficiently explains or predicts his detrimental behaviours.

Second, simulation does not involve deferred interpretation. As the speaker need not have any particular individual in mind when she simulates the thoughts of a certain type of individuals, there can be no original context to defer to. Even if there is, the original context does not serve to fix the character and content of the material in quotes, but only to anchor the thought whose simulation in the current context is put in the speaker’s own words. Hence, in these cases, the quotation marks do not signal that the content of the quoted material is to be assigned relative to the original context, in accordance with the character it assumes therein. Instead, they indicate that the quoted material is to be taken as a simulation of someone else’s thought, rather than an assertion of the speaker’s own thought. In other words, they serve as an indicator of the illocutionary force, rather than that of a change of character. ([18, pp. 270–271])

In short, simulated uses of “I” cannot be treated as instances of mentioning an indexical, as they involve neither metalinguistic reference nor deferred interpretation. If the use/mention distinction is clear-cut, they would count as instances of using an indexical, in that the speaker relies on the ordinary character of “I” to capture the self-oriented thought of her simulation target. Thereby, *pace* Kaplan, a *used* “I”

can have a shifted interpretation when the speaker adopts someone else’s perspective (more below). If the use/mention distinction is not clear-cut, the non-shiftability-outside-quotation argument would collapse, for it relies on an independently-justified use/mention distinction. Either way, simulated uses of “I” constitute counterexamples to the non-shiftability argument for direct reference.

2.2 Challenge to rigidity

Kaplan’s second celebrated argument for direct reference builds on the observation that the propositional contribution of “I” cannot be identified with the description that settles its referent at a context, roughly “the speaker”. ([5, p. 498]) Were the propositional contribution the same as the descriptive meaning, (10) would be truth-conditionally equivalent to (11), yet it isn’t. (10) is true iff there is a possible circumstance such that the actual speaker is not speaking. Such a possibility is alive. By comparison, (11) is true iff there is a possible circumstance in which whoever is uniquely speaking is not speaking. Such a possibility is not alive. Therefore, as the argument goes, the content of “I” is the actual speaker, rather than the description “the speaker”.

(10) I may not be speaking.

(11) The speaker may not be speaking.

However, the above argument only establishes that in (10), the content of “I” is the actual speaker, and therefore, *in general*, the content of “I” cannot be identified with the descriptive meaning. Crucially, it does not establish that in general, the content of “I” is the actual speaker. A valid counterexample suffices to refute a putative generalisation, but a valid example may not conclusively establish a putative generalisation.

Moreover, Kaplan only tested the rigidity of “I” vis-à-vis a description that is an uncontroversial non-rigid designator. Let’s further test its rigidity vis-à-vis an archetypal rigid designator. Consider (12)-(13).

(12) Had things been different, Hesperus may not have been Hesperus.

(13) Had things been different, I may not have been me.

The truth of (12) requires a possible circumstance accessible to the actual one wherein Hesperus is not Hesperus. The truth-conditional profile of (12) thus indicates that the name “Hesperus” rigidly designates its actual referent Hesperus, and does not change its referent from circumstance to circumstance.

In comparison, (13) seems to have two readings, depending on whether the discourse it occurs concerns objective or subjective identity. In the former case, (13) patterns with (12). Its truth requires a possible circumstance accessible to the actual one wherein the actual speaker is not (objectively speaking) the same as that speaker. Under this reading, the referent of “I” is rigid. In the latter case, (13) patterns with

(7) as it occurs in a discourse like (3) or (6) (see §1). Its truth requires a possible circumstance accessible to the actual one in which the person the speaker turns out to be is not (subjectively speaking) the same as the person the speaker actually is. Under this reading, the referent of “I” is not as rigid as traditionally thought. It refers to the person the speaker subjectively identifies herself as, which can be (a) her actual self whose identity is immediately given to her or (b) her counterfactual self whose identity is descriptively constructed (see §1) to various degrees of specification, such as a sighted person who may be less fearless, or simply a person born in another time. With (a), the referent of “I” does not vary across circumstances. With (b), the referent of “I” seems to vary across circumstances, depending on which individuals match the relevant description(s) and thus reify the speaker’s counterfactual self at a circumstance.

Thus construed, the referent of “I” seems to depend on the context of utterance in two different ways. First, it depends on who the speaker is at a context. Second, it depends on the perspective from which the speaker identifies herself at the context. When the discourse concerns objective self-identification, it inevitably hinges on the speaker’s actual perspective. Thereby, “I” refers to the actual speaker, as in (14), and behaves as a rigid designator. When the discourse concerns subjective self-identification, it need not hinge on the speaker’s actual perspective, and can ride on an imagined perspective the speaker momentarily adopts. Thereby, “I” may refer to the actual speaker or the person the speaker imagines herself to be, as in (15), and does not behave as a rigid designator.

(14) If I had been more cautious, I would have won.

(15) If I had been a finalist of this competition, I would have fainted at the thought of having to present my work in front of a panel that includes myself and other established designers.

Hence, counterfactual uses of “I” provide counterexamples to the rigidity argument for direct reference.

Compared to proper names, the less than rigid behaviour of “I” can be traced to the different ways identity is given in our rigidity judgements, i.e. judgements concerning the reference of designators when we consider a certain way the world may be or might have been, which is different from what is actually the case. With proper names,

We begin with the objects, which we have, and can identify, in the actual world. We can then ask whether certain things might have been true of the objects. ([6, p. 53])

In other words, the identity of the objects picked out by proper names (*modulo* fictional names) is presumed to be *given* when we entertain counterfactual scenarios. In contrast, the reference of “I” hinges on self-identification, or “self-acquaintance”:

Each one of us can fix the reference of the word ‘I’ by means of acquaintance with oneself, self-acquaintance. ([7, p. 301])

This explains why referring to oneself by “I” implies self-awareness, while referring to oneself by one’s name does not necessarily do so. ([14]) Hence, while arguably no conceptual mediation is required for reference with a proper name ([6]), “someone must have a concept of the self ...for the use of ‘I’ ” ([7, p. 303]). Provided that one’s concept of the self could, in the right kind of imaginative contexts, counterfactually pick out someone other than one’s actual self, “I” would not be as rigid as a proper name.

To sum up, in simulated and counterfactual uses of “I”, the speaker performs self-reference with “I” while detaching from her actual perspective to simulate others or to portray herself counterfactually. The detachment may take the form of (i) projecting one’s actual person as counterfactually having some properties, as is often the case in counterfactual self-portrait, or (ii) projecting oneself onto someone else that satisfies certain descriptions, as is usually the case with simulation. ([10, p. 455]) Either way, “I” expresses self-reference without expressing a reference to the actual speaker. Consequently, it ceases to be directly referential. Instead, it seems to express a reference to the speaker’s detached self whose identity is descriptively constructed.

Moreover, simulated and counterfactual uses of “I” suggest that the content of “I” is sensitive to not so much the speaker at a context, as the person the speaker identifies herself as from a certain perspective at the context. Such sensitivity to the speaker’s perspective-driven self-identification is supported by the fact that immunity to self-misidentification is observed not only in standard uses of “I” but also in simulated and counterfactual uses (see §1). That is, the speaker has first-person access not only to her actual person who fills in the speaker role at a context, but also to (a) the person she projects herself into when she adopts someone else’s perspective, and (b) the person she imagines herself to be when she counterfactually embodies a different perspective.

Provided that (i) the character of “I” is to capture the cognitive significance of “I” ([5, p. 530]), (ii) the cognitive significance of “I” consists in the speaker’s first-person access to the referent of “I” (see §1), and (iii) the speaker’s first-person access to the referent of “I” is rooted in the speaker’s self-identification with a certain person from a certain perspective at a context, it follows that the character of “I” shall specify that an occurrence of “I” refers to the person the speaker at a context identifies herself as from the perspective she espouses at the context. I outline a formal representation of the proposed character of “I” in the next section.

3 Perspectival Character of “I”

The intuitive idea is that “I” refers to the person the speaker identifies herself as from a certain perspective. Hence, the contextual parameters relevant to fixing the

content of “I” include not only the speaker at the context, c_a , but also the perspective espoused by the speaker at the context, c_p . To a first approximation, the character of “I” can be represented as follows.

$$(16) \llbracket I \rrbracket(c, w, t) = \lambda P [\forall x (c_a \text{ self-identifies as } x \text{ from } c_p) \rightarrow P(x)]$$

When c_p is the speaker’s actual perspective, the person the speaker identifies herself as from that perspective is her actual person. Thus,

$$(17) \text{ if } c_p = \text{the speaker's actual perspective} \\ \forall x (c_a \text{ self-identifies as } x \text{ from } c_p) \rightarrow x = c_a \\ \therefore \llbracket I \rrbracket(c, w, t) = \lambda P P(c_a)$$

When c_p is different from the speaker’s actual perspective, the person the speaker identifies herself as from that perspective would be descriptively given. Hence,

$$(18) \text{ if } c_p \neq \text{the speaker's actual perspective} \\ \forall x (c_a \text{ self-identifies as } x \text{ from } c_p) \leftrightarrow C(x), \\ \text{wherein } C \text{ stands for the cluster of properties attributed to,} \\ \text{hence constituting the identity of, } x. \\ \therefore \llbracket I \rrbracket(c, w, t) = \lambda P [\forall x (C(x) \rightarrow P(x))]$$

(18) suggests that in simulated and counterfactual uses, “I” projects a variable bound by universal quantification. This reflects the intuition that in simulation or counterfactual self-portrait, the speaker transports herself into *anyone* that satisfies some relevant descriptions. However, this may not be the only correct analysis. If the speaker transports herself into a typical person that satisfies the descriptions, the variable projected by “I” may be bound by the generic operator GEN (as in [13]). Nonetheless, the choice of the operator is tangential to the overall shape of the analysis motivated by the conceptual considerations in §2.

The present analysis does rule out the possibility of singular reference in simulated and counterfactual uses of “I”. Might this be too strong? Consider an example from Predelli ([16, p. 408]), in which a lecturer puts herself in Aristotle’s shoes to present his apparently self-contradictory views on human life by uttering (19):

- (19) I argued at length that one lives the best life by exercising both moral and intellectual virtues. And now I am suddenly advocating a rather different position, namely that the good life must be devoted solely to theoretical activity. Do you see a way out of this apparent inconsistency?

At first glance it appears that the simulated uses of “I” in (19) simply refer to Aristotle. However, should it turn out that Aristotle did not in fact hold any of the views that have been attributed to him, it seems that “I” in (19) would not refer to Aristotle, but to the individual who holds the views commonly (but perhaps mistakenly) attributed to Aristotle. Thus construed, the present analysis seems to be on the right track in

attributing general reference to simulated uses of “I”.

4 Conclusion

In this paper I’ve argued that the uses of “I” in simulation and counterfactual self-portray challenge the Kaplanian dictum on the directly referential status of “I” and demand a revision of its character in perspectival terms.

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“我”的他指用法及视角意义

黄敏瑶

摘 要

英语中的第一人称代词“我”被视为典型的卡普兰索引词 (Kaplanian indexical)。“我”在语境中自指说话人: 说话人为其直接指代的内容 (content); 而免于自我误认是其自指意义 (character) 的重要特征。本文指出“我”在非内涵语境中有符合免于自我误认, 但指代他者的用法, 包括使用“我”来模仿他人或进行反事实的自我描绘。我将论证: (一) 这些用法对直接指称理论中的“不可转换性”和“刚性”论证构成挑战; (二) 这些用法要求我们对“我”的自指意义作出修正, 以反映其语义内容对说话者自我识别视角的敏感性。