Ostension and Demonstrative Reference

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Plan of my talk

- Present a puzzle with respect to ostension and demonstrative reference

- Try to convince you that the puzzle is real

- Offer a tentative solution to my puzzle

- Indicate a more general view (about reference) suggested by the proposed solution

Case A: "Food."

(Image source: Pixabay)

Case B: "This is food"

Three ideas:

1) Case A and case B are extremely similar (in both cases a speaker communicates to an addressee (A) that a particular object (*o*) is food.

2) In case B, "this" refers to *o*.

3) In case A, it would be weird to say that the act of showing *o* refers to *o.*

Arguing for 3) (preliminaries)

- X is showing *o* to A IFF X has the intention(s) that
  - A pays attention to *o*,
  - A notices X's intention that A pays attention to *o*
  - A pays attention to *o* based on noticing that this is what X intends A to do.

- Showing or offering an object to someone – *implicit communicative actions* (they pass a Gricean test)

- However, the object shown or offered is not a sign.

o is not a sign

- *o* does not mean anything (no code)

- *o* does not refer to itself
  - How could an object refer to itself?
  - We need a complicate setting in order to use an object as a sign for itself -> See the two rings case
  - Even then it is disputable that the object refers to itself
  - Stark contrast between such cases and the (simple case) of showing *o*

Showing *o* does not refer to *o*

- (tentative) reductio: if it did, any similar implicit communicative action performed on *o* would refer to *o*; but it cannot be so – see the chess move example
  - Reply: But it has to, since by pointing at *o* one succeeds in referring to *o*, and proper (etymologically speaking) ostension cannot be that different from pointing
- One could demonstrate *o* to somebody in many ways. It is difficult to talk about reference in all these cases.

Showing *o* does not refer to *o* (ii)

- Deferred reference: I point at something to refer to something else (and not *o*)

- More importantly: we habitually point at things without trying to refer at all.

- The proper function of a demonstrative act seems to be only to demonstrate an object.

- We can refer to the demonstrated object by an additional act (a speech act), but the act of demonstrating something does not by itself have a referential function.

Arguing for 2)

- Non-referential uses of "this" ignored here

- Failure to refer ignored

- Pseudo-referential use ignored

- Vagueness does not prove that by using "this" we do not refer to *o*

- Ambiguity:
  - see Quine 1950 and Wittgenstein 1953 on ostension
  - we can distinguish between demonstrative ambiguity and referential ambiguity, but we still have a problem here

Ambiguity of "this"

- Reductio: If demonstrative indexicals like "this" and "that" did not refer, then proper names and natural kind terms would not directly refer to anything either.

- Quine went down this road (from inscrutability of reference to dismissal of reference altogether), but this seems too revisionary.

- We can reasonably hope to overcome most ambiguities (even "ontological / conceptual scheme ambiguities") by more talk, additional involvement in our practices and by further engaging ourselves in our environment.

Arguing for 1)

- Strong intuition (shared perhaps by Frege 1956 and Russell 1940, 1948)
  - Reply: The use of a demonstrative requires a demonstration (Kaplan 1977), so they cannot be the same thing
  - Counter-reply: Even if this was so (it is not), 'doing A is a necessary condition for doing B' does not entail 'doing A is unlike doing B'

- "Also, this."

- The ostension of *o* in our first case can be said to be performed to refer to *o*, in some sense.

Escaping objections against 1)

- Intentionalism (Kaplan 1989, Bach 1992, Perry 2009) / contextualism (McGinn 1981, Wettstein 1984): a demonstrative gesture is not a necessary condition for fixing the reference of "this" in case B (but is involved in case A)
  - Reply: An addressee could get it that I am *telling her* that *o* is food without recognizing that I am showing *o* to her (babies can learn new words this way; see Szufnarowska, Rohlfing, Fawcett, & Gredebäck 2014).
  - Whenever I succeed to refer to refer to *o* (without a demonstration) by saying "This is food.", I could have said just "Food."
  - The difference between the two cases is syntactical (predication vs. *tagging*)

Escaping objections against 1) (ii)

- "red ball / green ball" case (inspired by Kaplan 1978, Reimer 1992): my ostensive gesture has failed in a different way from my use of "this" (so case A and case B cannot be perfectly similar)
  - Reply: we were not comparing the demonstrative use of an ostension with the referring use of a demonstrative, but the use of an ostension and of a demonstrative *to refer* to something
  - if I refer to the ball in my hand by saying (falsely) "This is my ball" to the guests, then I can do the same by saying "my ball" and showing them the ball in my hand.

Arguing for 1) and escaping one final objection

- I cannot think of a case in which one would fail (or succeed) in communicating that *o* is food (or anything else) in only one of the two cases (A and B)

- most of the phenomena discussed with respect to "this" (deferred reference, predicative use, and even anaphoric use) could be replicated in the case of an ostension […]

- Final objection: there are complex demonstratives but no "complex ostension"

  - Reply: To deny that in saying "this red ball is mine" one also predicates of this (*o*) that it is a red ball, you would have to say that "this red ball" works more like a definite description and not like a "true demonstrative"

The Puzzle

- If demonstrating *o* and saying "this" of *o* did play the same semantic function, then a speaker, by doing any of the two, would either refer to *o* or not. One could not refer to *o* in one way, but not in the other way. If this was possible, then the two would not have the same semantic function.

- So (1), (2) and (3) cannot be all true, but (I think) we have good reasons to accept them all.

Finding a Solution

- When we talk about direct reference in the case of proper names we conceive reference as a mathematical function.

- Perhaps we should avoid applying this concept to case A (the ostensive tagging case).

- So, how do we refer to *o* in case A? In showing *o* and saying "food" one is using *o* to tag it as food (to an addressee).

- When an ostension is performed as part of a speech act, the demonstrated object itself is *used* and the speech act is *performed on it.*

- (The difference between tagging *o* as food to someone and offering *o* to someone is one of a degree only.)

Finding a solution (continued)

- In demonstrating *o* to an addressee one is trying to make the addressee involve herself in some *empirical action* (Ştefanov, forthcoming) performed upon *o* (looking at *o*, listening to *o*, touching *o* etc.), but if that condition is already satisfied, there is no need to demonstrate *o* anymore.

- The condition could be satisfied in different ways. [...]

- The problem of determining what thing(s) we are acting on is not specific to the use of demonstrative gestures. -> the answer can be provided by talking about one's intentions, the context of one's action, the conceptual content of one's action being made explicit in the descriptions (D) under which one is ready to accept that one has done D etc. (see Anscombe 1963)

- (+ my intuition that the more recent debate on reference-fixing of demonstratives opposes conceptualists and anti-conceptualists)

Getting closer

- Whose (empirical) actions should count in determining what object are we talking about?

- The egg/book case

- The crowded beach case (inspired by King 2014) -> Nunberg 1993 to the rescue

- Perhaps the rule should be that I directly refer to the object the addressee of my speech act is acting on.

- Instead of doing things the other way around, we should model the use of "this" to predicate something of an object after the more primitive case of ostensive tagging (since this is only natural).

- change of vocabulary: *tagging* and *this-predication*

To sum up:

(i) Both in *tagging* and in *this-predication* we use an object directly to say something about it. Such explicit communicative actions are usually accompanied by demonstrations, but they need not be.

(ii) A constitutive condition for performing both explicit communicative actions is that their addressee is performing an empirical action on the object we use for tagging or this-predication.

(iii) A success condition for performing both explicit communicative actions is that their agent and their addressee get to cooperate in acting on the same object.

(iv) Demonstrations (either by ostension, or by "this") are implicit communicative actions (the explicit form of which would be "look at this!" or, more generally, "engage yourself perceptually with this!"). As such, one can demonstrate an object without referring to it (that is, without using it to perform a speech act or some explicit communicative action).

(v) More generally, all speech acts performed directly on an object (acted upon by the addressee and with respect to which both the speaker and the addressee can be said to cooperate), regardless of the fact that their syntactic structure includes an object handle (i. e. "this") for the purpose of predication or not, are a basic form of reference.

Finally, the solution:

- We agree to (1) since, according to (i)-(iii) and (v), the difference between our two initial cases was only a syntactic one.

- We agree to (2) since, for the same reasons, by uttering "this is food" we actually use *o* directly to predicate that it is food.

- We agree to (3) since, according to (iv), the (isolated) ostension of *o* does not refer to *o*.

Final remarks

- But first, let me show you my drama queen side ☺

- I might seem to suggest that "this" does not refer, after all. What I actually say is that it has a referential use (I am an anti-representationalist but I do not want to give up the idea of reference)

- Our ability to refer directly to features from our environment and our related cognitive abilities (must) come from the fact that we act in our environment and in doing so we cooperate to each other.

- I like the analytic pragmatism project (see Brandom 2008), but I do not know how much just yet.

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