

Three-dimensional semantics

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In this paper I introduce the sketch of a three-dimensional semantics. My presentation includes two parts: (1) I spell out the historical and theoretical motivations grounding three-dimensionalism; (2) I apply the framework to some classical epistemic puzzles which challenge direct reference theories.

(1) Three-dimensionalism shares the central motivation behind all two-dimensionalist frameworks inspired by Kaplan: it aims at reconciling the referentialist's insights with an account of cognitive significance. (a) It does so by maintaining in the first place the Kripkean distinction between metaphysics and epistemology, and by treating metaphysical contents as the official contents in normal communication. Just as in classical accounts of direct reference, what is relevant to the evaluation of "Obama is tall" at a given circumstance is that the individual Obama himself be tall. This official proposition is the **content-dimension**. (b) It attempts to solve epistemic puzzles in terms of the *two* other dimensions. The first of these corresponds to a propositionalized Kaplanian character: it is the set of contexts in which the sentence will be uttered truly. This **character-dimension** comes close to the first intension usually proposed in the two-dimensionalist literature. It explains well the cognitive value of indexical expressions. For instance, I can grasp the character-proposition expressed by "I am tall" even when I don't know who the referent of 'I' is: *that the individual who is the utterer in the context be tall*. In this case, it is because I lack some information (namely, the speaker) relevant to fixing the context that I lack the referent: as far as I know, a variety of contexts are still equally plausible candidates to fix the reference of 'I'. Now, one major trouble for most two-dimensionalists, which led Stalnaker (2006) himself to become skeptical as to its very usefulness in the analysis of a priori knowledge, is that the character-dimension seems to be incapable of explaining the cognitive significance of context-*insensitive* expressions, for which contexts invariably yield the same content. So that the next important issue becomes this: are names somehow indexical expressions? Some authors have defended that the character of names is a variable function. But others, including Kaplan or Perry, have repeatedly insisted that the role of context is not to determine the reference of a single name, but simply to disambiguate which name has been used. The aim of three-dimensionalism is to account for the cognitive value of names in a framework that preserves the theoretical benefits of the claim that they are *not* indexical expressions. A hearer may, even when no information is lacking to fix the context, fail to know that my utterance of "Hesperus is Phosphorus" expresses a necessary truth. My proposal is that what was not perfectly fixed for such a hearer is a fact about the *language* itself. Names are metaphysically individuated by their form and bearer, and they are epistemically individuated by their form and a description of their bearer. Our hearer's descriptive knowledge of the names themselves is not fine-grained enough to exclude the possibility that the names do not corefer. This is because his imperfect descriptions of the two words (in fact, of their bearers) could be satisfied by several—so far indistinguishable to him—words, depending on which world turns out to be actual. Which language is actual is a matter of which world is actual, and our hearer doesn't know exactly which world is actual. What our hearer lacks is thus knowledge of the metalinguistic proposition *the word 'Hesperus' for the evening star is*

corereferential with the word 'Phosphorus' for the morning star. That piece of knowledge, although it does not modify his already reliable capacity to identify the relevant object in the world as the referent of both names, sharpens his knowledge of the public language by eliminating some languages from the set of possible languages that are compatible with his knowledge of the public language. I call the function which assigns different words to different (epistemically plausible) languages the metacharacter, or the **language-dimension**. Unlike characters and contents, metacharacters belong only to the metasemantic story, and they are often private. The variability of metacharacters is what explains the cognitive significance of identity statements involving names. The primary effect an utterance of "Hesperus is Phosphorus" has on an ignorant hearer is to modify his beliefs about the public language. (Of course, such metalinguistic discoveries subsequently cause substantive discoveries, when the information contained in the corresponding mental files gets merged.) The trick is that, contrary to what led Frege to abandon the kind of metalinguistic view defended here, knowledge of words involves *substantive* knowledge of the world: public words are mentally individuated with the help of a substantive description of their outer content.

(2) Three-dimensionalism can deal with various puzzles for the New Theory of Reference, including identity statements of the form "a=b", *some* kinds of belief reports, empty names, and reference change. (a) I may report one of John's mistaken beliefs, which he acquired through some confusing hearsay, by saying "John believes that Tully is Caesar." In doing so, I am not *asserting* that he believes the necessarily false proposition but rather that he has a wrong metalinguistic belief about *how these public names themselves are to be individuated*. In this example, as in many others, including the Paderewski case, belief reports require, in order to become informative, a *reinterpretation* on the part of the hearer, one which naturally yields a metalinguistic reading. (b) Empty names like 'Pegasus' have no metaphysical content. But they nonetheless have a cognitive value, because their metacharacter associates them with an informative proposition: *that the word 'Pegasus' is such that its bearer is the unique individual which is a winged horse*. There is no winged horse in our world, so the name has no actual content in our language. But we can pretend it has one by epistemically shifting the actual world of introduction: had the baptism occurred in a world where there is a winged horse, then 'Pegasus' would have picked out that winged horse as its content. (c) As Evans (1973) noted, reference changes undermine the *strong causalism* sketched by Kripke or Donnellan. The fact that 'Madagascar' changed reference shows that baptism does not fix reference once and for all. Three-dimensionalism has an easy account of reference changes. These occur when, for some reason, an important proportion of the speakers in a linguistic community come to entertain new metalinguistic beliefs about the name. An old description "'N' is such that it picks out the object which has property *P* as its content" gets replaced by a new one "'N' is such that it picks out the object which has property *Q* as its content." Transmission preserves reference iff an important proportion of speakers keep the same metalinguistic beliefs about the name itself. So three-dimensionalism provides support for a *mild causalism*, a version of causalism which is not cognitively indifferent.

In short, three-dimensionalism is a new framework that explains the cognitive significance of identity statements involving names by appealing to the imperfect metalinguistic beliefs that speakers have about *words* themselves.