Meaning and Context

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Neither contemporary truth-conditional semanticists nor any of their predecessors such as Frege, Russell, and Quine seriously doubt that natural language is systematically context-dependent. As Comrie (1985) lays out, practically all languages of the world grammatically realize tenses and merely differ in the variety of tenses they realize and their interplay with grammatical mood and the corresponding modalities on the semantic side. Likewise, indexical expressions like ‘I’, ‘tomorrow’, ‘here’ and demonstratives like ‘this’ and ‘that’, or ‘over there’ are pervasive in natural languages and obviously context-dependent. Indexicals are already mentioned in Frege (1892), and under the label ‘egocentric particulars’ indexicals and demonstratives play a crucial role in Russell’s theory of knowledge by acquaintance. Reichenbach’s (1947) account of indexicals based on occurrences of linguistic signs (tokens) and a similar approach by Burks (1949) also deserve to be mentioned.

Nowadays, the prevalent way to specify the semantic contribution of an indexical, including tenses, to the truth-conditional meaning of an utterance as a whole is based on Kaplan’s (1989) ‘Logic of Demonstratives’, which he introduced in a series of talks in the early 70s. In Kaplan’s approach, the linguistic meaning (character) of a sentence in a context yields an intension (content), which in turn, depending on the circumstances of evaluation, has an extension. Formally, contexts are in this approach regarded as $n$-tuples consisting of the missing ingredients needed for the saturation of indexicals: the speaker for uses of ‘I’, the addressee(s) for uses of ‘you’, the time of utterance for ‘now’ and more complex temporal indexicals like ‘tomorrow’ or ‘Thursday in two weeks’, and the world of the utterance for a use of ‘actually’. In Kaplan’s original view, tenses and modal expressions such as ‘it is necessary that’ were analyzed as modal operators of basic tense logic and normal modal logic, which implicitly quantify over the circumstances of evaluation but do not affect the
context parameter. Thus, evaluation proceeds in two steps. First, indexicals are saturated: the missing ingredients are provided by the context parameter. In a second step, tenses and modal expressions operate on the resulting intension and evaluate it with respect to different circumstances of evaluation.

Since Kaplan's approach has been very influential, it is worth taking a look at an example of how it works. Let the linguistic meaning of 'I' be represented by a function $\llbracket I \rrbracket$ from contexts to a function from circumstances of evaluation to an element in a domain $D$ such that $\llbracket I \rrbracket (c)(i)$ is the agent of the context $c$ no matter what the circumstances of evaluation $i$ are. By the same token the linguistic meaning of 'you' could be represented by a function just as the one for 'I' except that $\llbracket you \rrbracket (c)(i)$ yields the addressee of $c$. Suppose that the linguistic meaning of 'know' is a function from contexts to a function that given some circumstances of evaluation $i$ yields the set of all ordered pairs $\langle x, y \rangle$ such that $x$ and $y$ are in the domain $D$ and $x$ knows $y$ at the time of $i$ in the world of $i$. It would go beyond the scope of an introduction to specify a formal language or use a