

ABSTRACT

What is Special About the First Person?

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There has been much recent discussion of the phenomena of “*de se*” interpretation, so called following David Lewis. It has less often been noticed that the phenomenon is associated with all indexicals or indexical usages, of what we might, following Bertrand Russell, call the egocentric type, e.g., *now* (the time at which the speaker is speaking), *here* (the place where the speaker is at the time), and so forth. The interpretation of these words is easily given: they rigidly designate elements of the context of speech. That observation, however, does not explain the distinction between two interpretations of (1):

(1) John wants [himself to be chosen]

where what we call the A-interpretation has John expressing his want as “I am chosen,” and the B-interpretation has him expressing it as “X is chosen,” for some *X* whose semantic value happens to be John. Nor does it explain the distinction between two interpretations of (2):

(2) John wants [Bill to leave now]

where in the A-interpretation John would express his want as “Bill leaves now,” and in the B-interpretation as “Bill leaves at *T*,” for some *T* whose semantic value happens to be the present time.

Generalizing the view in Higginbotham (2003), I will argue that the A-interpretations all arise in virtue of the reference of the indexical being given through the higher situation that constitutes one argument of the embedding verb, its E-position, as I have called it, generalizing Davidson’s suggestion for action sentences. Thus the A-interpretation of (1) is as in (3):

(3) $(\exists e) \text{ want}(\text{John}, ^{\wedge}[\text{subject of } e \text{ is chosen}], e)$

and the A-interpretation of (2) is as in (4):

(4) $(\exists e) \text{ want}(\text{John}, ^{\wedge}[\text{Bill leave at time of } e], e)$

This hypothesis explains at once why there is a sense in which the controller subject, John, cannot, on the A-interpretations of (3) and (4) respectively, have been in error about whose being chosen is in question, or at what time Bill’s departure is desired. (On the B-interpretations, errors of this kind are easy to make.) For, when the elements answering to the reflexive and *now* are given in terms of the state *e*, there can be no question of the subject’s having misidentified them.

Such “immunity to error through misidentification,” as Sydney Shoemaker called it, is seen also in main clauses, when the indexicals are used in making an assertion based on a present perception. In cases that Hegel called “sense-certainty,” as when I say, looking out the window, “Now it is night-time,” I cannot be right in thinking it is night-time at *t*, but wrong in how I identified *t*. Not so, of course, for “It is night-time at 6 PM,” where it is indeed night-time at 6 PM, but I think it is 7 PM.

The *de se* interpretation of embedded clauses is known to be associated with particular expressions: H.-N. Castaneda long ago emphasized some uses of the English emphatic reflexive, and I and Gennaro Chierchia have discussed the role of controlled PRO. On the hypothesis advanced here, however, the reason for this association lies, not as in Chierchia, in some redescription of the ordinary semantics of propositional attitudes and the like, but rather in the peculiar anaphoric properties of these expressions. Although the antecedent of PRO must be overt (not an implicit argument), these anaphors do not in the *de se* cases inherit their meaning from the surface subject, but inherit it rather from the particular thematic role that the subject has with respect to the higher state *e*. (Naturally, there are many cases where PRO simply does inherit the reference of its antecedent; therefore, it is not a property of PRO as anaphor that induces the

relevant interpretations, but rather the possibility of so interpreting it, given the thematic role of subject of a mental state.) Conversely, when such anaphoric properties are exhibited, we get interpretations that stand to the objects in question as the *de se* stands to reference to the agent. Thus, when a time-indication in an embedded clause is located with respect to the agent's state *e*, as in sequence of tense interpretations, the time belongs to the *agent's* present, past, or future, as the case may be. So if I thought yesterday, on the basis of how I felt, that I had a cold, then what I thought is that I had a cold at the very time of so thinking. That is why, although it is intelligible for me to have thought, "I feel like I have a cold, but it is a cold really or the flu?" it would be unintelligible for me to have thought, "It feels like I have a cold, but is it really now that I have a cold?"

I have observed elsewhere that the difference between PRO and pronouns (even the first-person pronoun) emerges very clearly in gerundive contexts under verbs such as *remember* or *imagine*. So (5) is possibly true, but (6) is nonsense:

- (5) John remembered his/himself walking to school (but he didn't realize it was his walking to school that he remembered).
- (6) John remembered [PRO walking to school] (but he didn't realize it was his walking to school that he remembered).

The same observation helps explain the difference between (7) and (8):

- (7) John feels that he is sad.
- (8) John feels sad.

Even if John in (7) knows perfectly well that it is his sadness that is in question, he can feel that he is sad on the basis of observation of his own behavior, the acceptance of other people's testimony, etc. To feel sad, however, is different. It is to feel [PRO sad], where PRO is given as the subject of the feeling. Hence it is to be in a conscious state, whose clausal object expresses the thought that the subject of that very state is sad. Hence (7) differs from (8), and hence also the difference between feeling sad and being sad. In this and other cases, knowing the particular semantic properties that PRO may contribute, we can posit PRO in complements where those properties show up.

To return to the question that forms the title of this discussion: there is in a sense nothing special about the first person, or about the *de se*. The first person indexical is governed by a trivial rule (it refers to its own speaker); and the peculiarly first-personal interpretation e.g. of English PRO is a reflection of an anaphoric possibility, one that is found equally with tenses, and could in principle occur with other forms as well. As perhaps it does, even though not with specific lexical items. There are many things that may be associated, sometimes or always, with a particular mental state or speech act *e*. There must be a thinker or speaker to whom the mental state or act belongs, and it must be in time. It is less clear that it must be in space somewhere; and it may, although it need not, take cognizance of other elements, such as the cultural perspective that is responsible for it. These cannot be unambiguously reflected in indexicals, which in embedded contexts refer as they would if said by the speaker of the whole sentence (and so always admit what I have called B-interpretations above). But they can be found in anaphors like PRO or Chinese *zi-ji*, or in morphemes such as tense or aspect. I am told that Italian (9), using the imperfect, means that the Gianni thinks the act in question is rude *simpliciter* (of course from his perspective, so Gianni may be expected to have been offended, for instance), whereas the perfective as in (10) is relatively impersonal, or subject to relativization (so Gianni may have been thinking it would be rude in China).

- (9) Gianni pensava che (cio') era scortese
Gianni think-imp that (that) was-imp rude
- (10) Gianni pensa che (cio') e' stato scortese
Gianni think-pres that (that) was-perf rude

As the imperfect is subject to Sequence of Tense, the observation suggests a general permeability of the *de se* sort in imperfective complements. Conversely, the *de se* phenomenon itself is a species of a wider genus.