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Indexicality

The term *indexicality* refers to the pervasive context-dependency of natural language utterances, including such varied phenomena as regional accent (indexing speaker's identity), indicators of verbal etiquette (marking deference and demeanor), the referential use of pronouns (I, you, we, he, etc.), demonstratives (this, that), deictic adverbs (here, there, now, then), and tense. In all of these cases, the interpretation of the indexical form depends strictly on the context in which it is uttered. To say that any linguistic form is "indexical" is to say that it stands for its object neither by resemblance to it, nor by sheer convention, but by contiguity with it. As Charles Peirce put it, an indexical sign stands in a relation of "dynamical coexistence" with its object. In other words, the indexical and what it stands for are in a sense copresent in the context of utterance.

Despite the broad scope of indexicality, the most familiar examples are natural language pronouns and deictics. If I utter "I want you to have this" while handing over a book to Madeleine, the forms "I, you, this" are indexical because they must be interpreted in relation to the situation of utterance. Thus the identical utterance form, if spoken in another situation, could pick out a different speaker and addressee, as well as a different object. Moreover, because indexicals encode little or no description of their referents, a form like "this" could as well be used to refer to a physical thing, an event ("this conference"), a period of time ("this Thursday"), or a place ("this is where I live"). In short, there is no inherent property of thisness, thatness, hereness or thereness that an object must display in order to be appropriately denoted by the corresponding indexicals. Instead, what indexicals encode are the relations between objects and contexts (e.g., proximal, distal, speaker, addressee, simultaneous, antecedent). It is this link to context that secures uniqueness of reference even without description. Part of what makes this possible is the directive function of indexicals, whereby they direct an addressee to look, listen or take an object in hand. Similarly, the close association between indexicals and gestures (pointing, showing,

handing over) helps to anchor them in the interactive field of utterance, what Karl Bühler called the "demonstrative field."

Most indexicals can be used either exophorically, in reference to objects in the speech setting, or anaphorically, in reference to objects mentioned in prior discourse. Similarly, most can be used alone (this), or elaborated with lexical description (this book). Deictic forms typically vary in referential scope according to the situation. Thus "here" can as well be used to denote a point on the speaker's own body, the immediate space of utterance, the area, building, region, country, hemisphere in which the utterance occurs, or indeed the entire earth. It is an empirical question how variable the scope of a given form in any language is, and how many degrees of remove from the utterance space are lexically distinguished in the language (cf. English *here/there* vs. French *ici/là/là-bas*). Another defining feature of indexicals is that they systematically shift in reported speech. So "I'll stay here with you" becomes "he said he'd stay there with me." Inversely, in verbatim quotation, the current speaker uses indexicals that are anchored not in the current context but in some other, as when George tells Terry what Jack said to Madeleine, saying "Jack told Madeleine 'Here, I want you to have this'." Notice that the indexicals in the embedded quotation refer not to George and Terry, as they would normally do, but to Jack and Madeleine. Thus, just as indexicals are anchored to utterance context, so, too, they may be transposed from the current context into other ones, recalled, imagined or merely projected. Indeed, these forms are among the most central resources in human languages for tracking references both within and across contexts.

In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in the study of indexicals, both referential and non-referential. This research has demonstrated that indexicality is a universal feature of human languages, that all referential-indexical systems (including pronouns, demonstratives, and deictics) share a number of specific properties, and that indexical relations are crucial to contextual inference, reflexivity and semantic interpretation more generally. It has also become clear that processes of indexical anchoring are more subtle and complex than hitherto appreciated, and that they cannot be understood without relatively deep analysis of the social and cultural contexts of speech. At the same time, the formidable abstractness of indexicality as classically defined, and the sheer variety of things the term is applied to, raise the question of whether there is any significant unity to the category. Furthermore, the lack of an established methodology for studying the phenomenon has made it difficult to compare indexical forms or paradigms across languages. Ultimately, the concept of contiguity on which indexicality is based must be defined relative to local standards of copresence and relevance. This implies that the universality of the phenomenon in human languages is offset by the highly culture-specific ways in which indexicals are structured and interpreted. These are among the central problems facing contemporary research on the topic, and it is only through fine-grained empirical work that they will be resolved.

(See also *body, crossing, functions, gesture, grammar, iconicity, inference, names, reflexivity, vision, voice*)

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