Referential Coordination through Mental Files

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On the standard model, linguistic communication makes it possible for the hearer to entertain the thoughts expressed by the speaker, and what makes that possible is the fact that the thoughts in question are encoded in the speakers words. However, there are challenges both to the idea that communication results in the sharing of thoughts, and to the idea that it works by encoding the thoughts. After briefly reviewing the contextualist challenge, which targets the latter idea, I will turn to another challenge to the standard model, raised by singular thought.

What characterizes singular thoughts, and especially indexical thoughts (the paradigm case), is the fact that the modes of presentation through which one thinks of objects are context-bound and perspectival. Such modes of presentation are best construed as mental files exploiting (and presupposing) certain contextual relations to the reference. This raises the communication problem, first raised by Frege: if indexical thoughts are context-bound and relation-based, how is it possible to communicate them to those who are not in the same context and do not stand in the right relations to the object? Arguably, one has to give up the claim that communication involves thought sharing, in such cases.

Following Frege, I will appeal to an important distinction between linguistic and psychological modes of presentation. Psychological modes of presentation are thought ingredients, while linguistic modes of presentation are encoded. Psychological modes of presentation are perspectival and context-bound: they are mental files whose role is to store information one can gain in virtue of standing in certain contextual relations to the reference of the file, so they are available only to subjects who are appropriately situated vis vis the object. It follows that thoughts involving such modes of presentation are not shareable with subjects who are not in the right type of context. But linguistic modes of presentation are fixed by the conventions of the language and they are shared by all the language users. They are public and serve to coordinate mental files in communication by constraining them to contain the piece of information they encode. In this way communication takes place even though the indexical thoughts entertained by the speaker are, in some sense, private and cannot be shared by the audience. Communication no longer involves the replication of thoughts only their coordination.

In the last part of the talk I will apply the coordination model of communication to the referential use of definite descriptions, and I will discuss a key objection based on the distinction between semantic reference and speakers reference.