

Perspective and Indexicality: A NeoLocalist approach

Craig Roberts
The Ohio State University
roberts.21@osu.edu

Localism is a very old idea among grammarians, stretching back at least to the Byzantine era, reflected in the work of von Humboldt and others in the 19th century, and emerging again in the work of Hjelmslev (1935, 1937) and a lively British tradition seen in the work of Anderson (1971) and Lyons (1977), as well as in more modern incarnation in the work of Talmy, Langacker, and Jackendoff. (Lyons, 1977, p. 718) characterizes it thus:

“[Localism is] the hypothesis that spatial expressions are more basic, grammatically and semantically, than various kinds of non-spatial expressions (...). Spatial expressions are linguistically more basic, according to the localists, in that they serve as structural templates, as it were, for other expressions; and the reason why this should be so, it is plausibly suggested by psychologists, is that spatial organization is of central importance in human cognition.”

Localism is often realized in some form of lexical decomposition, for example in the componential analysis of Dwight Bolinger (1975) or in that of Ray Jackendoff. But I offer a rather different approach, based not on decomposition but on presupposition. I argue that cross-linguistically what spatial expressions, indexicals, epistemic modals and a wide variety of other types of expressions have in common semantically is that they all presuppose a point of view with concomitant perspective on the relevant domain—actual space, and the space of epistemic possibilities being two prominent examples. The presupposed perspective, resolved contextually, then has a bearing on the resulting truth conditions of the expression in which the perspectival expression occurs. Moreover, there is evidence in all these domains that interlocutors track the relevant points of view in the discourse in which they’re engaged, and that point of view can shift dynamically in the course of interpretation of a single utterance, for example from that of the speaker or the interlocutors collectively to that of the agent of an embedding attitude. This simple, general approach yields insight into a wide range of *prima facie* unrelated phenomena, including not only the semantics of perspectival locative expressions and deictic motion verbs like *come*, but the *de se* character of indexicals (including shifting indexicals), puzzles about epistemic modals, the interpretation of Free Indirect Style, and that of Pottsian Conventional Implicature triggers—appositives and non-restrictive relative clauses, emotive epithets, etc. I’ll primarily illustrate this thesis with indexicals like English *I* and its shifting counterparts in other languages and by discussing how it sheds light on puzzles about epistemic modality.

References

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