

PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language  
Class 27: 'I'

1. What does the word 'I' mean?
2. We should first of all question whether it has a meaning. Some reasons to think so: must learn what it means when learning English; can translate it into other languages; can understand sentences in which it is used; it is in the dictionary. Compare with 'tox'.
3. It seems that we cannot pick out a single thing  $a$  and say that 'I' means  $a$ : there is no  $x$  such that 'I' means  $x$ . At least, not any person  $x$  (we will see later another possibility).
4. Is that true of 'Ithaca' as well? 'Ithaca' might be used to refer to various things, so it seems that there is no single thing  $x$  such that 'Ithaca' means  $x$ . So maybe there is no special difference between 'I' and 'Ithaca'?
5. Also, when you hear someone utter 'I', you have to figure who she means by 'I', using what you know about 'I' as a guide. Same with 'Ithaca'. Maybe the difference here is a matter of degree rather than kind.
6. But there do seem to be differences: 'I' is in the dictionary; 'Ithaca' is not. There are a bunch of things called 'Ithaca', and perhaps to fully understand the word you have to know which things are in that bunch; this seems to not be the case for 'I'. Finally, it is not absurd to claim that 'Ithaca' is multiply ambiguous; is this plausible in the case of 'I'?
7. So much for comparing 'I' with 'Ithaca' – what does 'I' mean? We could try relativizing meanings to contexts of use: the meaning of 'I' in context C is the speaker in C.
8. But then:
  - a. 'I' has different meanings in different contexts, which seems counterintuitive.
  - b. What if there is more than one speaker in C?
9. Can we fix the second problem?
  - a. Could try shrinking contexts so that they contain just one speaker. But it seems that sometimes we want to include more than one: 'I hate it when you talk while I'm talking'.
  - b. Could relativise differently: the meaning of 'I' as uttered by S is S. But when we give an account of 'that' we will need to refer to more than just the speaker – we will need to bring the context back.
  - c. We could doubly relativise: the meaning of 'I' as uttered by S in C is S; or we could relativise to *centered contexts* (i.e. contexts with a specially designated person): the meaning of 'I' in C is the centre of C. But then we are on a slippery slope.

10. What about the first problem? Perhaps we should not talk about the meaning of 'I' in different contexts, but its *referent*: the referent of 'I' in context C is the speaker in C.

This then defines a function from contexts to *contents*, where a content in this case is a person.

Kaplan called this the *character* of 'I', and proposed this to be the meaning of 'I'. Then we can say that although the referent of 'I' varies from context to context, its meaning does not.

11. I have a beef with this: then it means that what a speaker means by 'I' on an occasion of use is never what 'I' itself means – what a speaker means by 'I' is a person, not a function from contexts to persons.
12. What I think: to ask what 'I' means is to ask what 'I' is used to mean. We cannot give this answer: 'I' means *a*. But we can give this answer: 'I' is used by a speaker to mean herself. This still answers the question. We can think of me as having used a Kaplanian character to show what 'I' means, but the character is not what it means. Compare: maps.
13. Perhaps we should not be looking for a meaning of 'I'. Perhaps we should be looking for the truth conditions of sentences in which it occurs.
14. What are the truth conditions of 'I am cold' (for example)? Not this: 'I am cold' is true iff I am cold.
15. It seems that we need to relativise truth conditions to contexts of use. 'I am cold' is true in context C iff the speaker in C is cold. Then we get all the same problems that we saw above.
16. Here are some complications for the project of saying what 'I' is used to refer to on occasion of use:
- a. I am traditionally allowed to order whatever I want for my last meal. (Uttered by prisoner.)
  - b. I am parked out back. (Referring to my car.)
  - c. I am in the lead. (Referring to a horse.)
  - d. I'm about to fall off the ledge. (Referring to a child dressed as me.)
  - e. I'm having more ice-cream am I? (Maybe better with 'we')
  - f. I'm a jack-ass. (Post-it note on someone's back.)

Someone who understands 'I' can work out what the speaker means in each case – and the speaker is relying on her audience using her understanding of 'I'.