

REPETITION AND DIFFERENCE

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NOFAWORDSOWHATMAKESAWORDAWORDCANTBETHESPACESSURROUNDINGITINPRINT –**
as some have suggested. In speech, we do not single out words by pausing after one word and before the next one, but we even merge the idealized phonic constituents you will find in a pronunciation dictionary, so that there is no way to single out words in speech other than having some grasp of which parts of the flow of speech correspond to certain concepts. I won't be able to explain how this correspondence comes to be, but I will discuss a misconceived view of the ontology of words, and provide a brief sketch of, or introduction to, a more fruitful investigation.

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One might assume that part of the motivation for settling the issue of the metaphysics of words could be that the word “word” carries different senses which are generally not kept clearly apart in talking of words. Thus one might want to refine the notion and avoid getting the different senses mixed up in linguistic or philosophical discourse. While setting out in the quest for the metaphysics of words, Kaplan might be trying to refine the notion of “word” when he writes: “When I utter ‘Help! Help!’, I haven’t uttered two words, I’ve uttered one word twice” (Kaplan 1990: 96). Rather than being a refinement, this seems to me merely a privileging of one sense of “word”, and this is why: Sometimes “words” means “different words”, as when we talk about how many *words* a child has learned. Sometimes it means “linguistic units singled out according to certain conventions, for instance of a typographic kind”, as when we talk about the number of *words* in an essay or even a sentence. It makes no sense to *deny* that there are eight words in the sentence “It was clear that he could manage it” with reference to the fact that “it” occurs twice. Let’s assume that when Kaplan talks of “words”, what he means is “different words”. He is of course free to perform this privileging, and what motivates it is obviously the issue of the individuation of words. Apparently, then, Kaplan is interested in the individuation of *different* words, not in how “Help! Help!” is in one sense of “word” two words, rather than the single word “Helphelp!”. This interest also seems to be reflected in his claim that one can have “distinct words that are phonographs and whose semantic values are also exactly the same” (Kaplan 1990: 96).

Kaplan’s account and Cappelen’s criticisms

Kaplan attacks the token/type theory, which he calls the *orthographic* conception of a word, by pointing out that “there is no metaphysically fixed form in either speech or spelling” (Kaplan 1990: 100). The token/type theory is outlined very briefly as the view that “words are the *types* of which utterances and inscriptions are *tokens*” (Kaplan 1990: 97). This view gains some feasibility by being able to account for the intuition that there is something common to occurrences of the same “word”, but it has a hard time in accounting for the variation that may be found among these occurrences. Kaplan mentions the case of “color” and “colour”, which according to his theory are just one word spelled differently. The token/type theorist would seem bound to either claiming, rather contra-intuitively, that these are two different words, or declaring one of the

spelling variations to be the type of which the other is just a defective token. Defective tokens might not be a huge problem to the theory, but there seems to be no sensible criterion by which to decide on the type. Equally challenging is the task of explaining how utterances can be tokens of a written (or orthographic) type, and *vice versa*, or accounting for the strange parallelism that would occur if one were to propose two different types, one written and one spoken. The latter manoeuvre would allow one to refer all occurrences of a word to either the written or the spoken type, but the tremendously obvious connection between the two kinds of tokens and the two types would turn into a mysterious correlation.

Noting that “there are all kinds of variations that take place over time” (Kaplan 1990: 100), Kaplan proceeds to introduce a theory apt to account for these variations. And thus aptly designed, Kaplan’s model is stated as one “according to which utterances and inscriptions are *stages* of words, which are the *continuants* made up of these interpersonal stages along with some more mysterious *intrapersonal* stages” (Kaplan 1990: 98). The thrust of this model is its ability to allow for both changes and variations in the spellings and pronunciations of a word. Having abandoned the idea of a word’s “fixed and perfect Platonic form” (Kaplan 1990: 100), Kaplan still hasn’t provided a criterion for deciding when occurrences are of the *same word*. He does this by claiming that *repetition* is essentially what makes for word individuation. A thought experiment is described in which a subject – highly motivated, sincere, reflective and not reticent – is asked to repeat, after a count of five, names uttered by Kaplan (or anyone). Now Kaplan admits not being able to provide a detailed description of what goes on in this subject’s mind, but he appeals to the very strong inclination we have to say that what goes on in this thought experiment is *repetition* (Kaplan 1990: 103). In his eagerness to escape the errors pertaining to the token/type theory, Kaplan postulates that what constitutes repetition is not resemblance of the *repetendum* and the *repetitio*, but the subject’s *intention* of repeating what he just heard: “[T]he first thing that we should get out of *our* heads is the idea that we can tell whether the input and the output are utterances of the same word by looking at (or listening to) the physical object that comes out, and looking at (or listening to) the physical object that goes in” (Kaplan 1990: 106). What happens here is that the desire to discard a phonographic standard for successful utterances or inscriptions of a word, which might reasonably be supposed to turn out to be arbitrary, turns into

the unbearable view that *everything* that matters in word individuation is intention.

Herman Cappelen counters this view efficiently in “Intentions in Words”. He refers to a view such as Kaplan’s as an *intentional* theory of words, meaning that “it says that it is a necessary or sufficient condition for something being a token [of] a word that the producer of the token was in a certain intentional state at the production time” (Cappelen 1999: 92). Claiming that this intentional state is a necessary condition for producing a token of a word is further labelled *the Necessity Thesis*; claiming that it is a sufficient condition is labelled *the Sufficiency Thesis*. The sufficiency thesis is the first to be challenged, as Cappelen shows us a drawing not bearing resemblance to any symbol at all, which he supposedly drew having been asked to produce a token of “I”. What he points out is simply that regardless of the intentional state he may have been in at the outset of the production of the token, the result very clearly *isn’t* a token of “I”, and thus the sufficiency thesis fails to provide a correct description of how we individuate words (Cappelen 1999: 94). The “very clearly”-element consists in an appeal to intuitions, and Cappelen suggests some support for the sufficiency thesis, which if strong enough could lead one to ignoring one’s intuitions in this case: “Sometimes very strange looking tokens are treated as if they were tokens of the words the speaker tried to produce a token of.” (Cappelen 1999: 94) The support is subject to a twofold rejection: Firstly, accepting some sloppiness in token-production shouldn’t lead us to assume that anything goes – cases of sloppiness being borderline cases implies that some things are on the unacceptable side of the border. One could add to this that not only are very strange looking tokens on the unacceptable side; I could intend to produce a handwritten copy of *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* while keeping my gaze fixed on the original, only to discover after having finished that there was no ink in my ballpoint pen. There would be no token of any *Kritik* produced. Secondly, Cappelen points out that any treatment of something *as* a token of, for instance, “I”, doesn’t imply that it actually *is* a token of “I” (Cappelen 1999: 95). Kaplan claims explicitly that “a mispronunciation of a word is an utterance ... of *that* word” (Kaplan 1990: 105), and notes that cases in which the word uttered is other than

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the word intended must be “exotic indeed”. This doesn’t sound altogether unreasonable when sloppy articulation is considered, or terrible hand writing, or poor orthography; it isn’t hard to allow “hors” as a token of “horse”. But problems emerge when “ship” is uttered instead of “sheep”. If a Frenchman asks you what the English word for *mouton* is, you reply “sheep” and he says “d’accord, *ship!*”, I would claim that we are strongly inclined to say something along the lines of: “No, monsieur, that’s a *different word*, which means a large seagoing vessel – you should lengthen the vowel to get it right.” To understand what someone means plainly doesn’t guarantee that the right words were used.

Cappelen’s counter-example to the necessity thesis is a token found on the street, saying “CAN YOU SPARE A QUARTER?”, which could be employed to ask people whether they can spare a quarter. If this token was produced with the wrong intentions, or none at all, Cappelen claims that the proponent of the necessity thesis “would have to say both that the ink mark isn’t a token of an English sentence and that [he] never used it to ask anyone to spare a quarter” (Cappelen 1999: 95). Cappelen is being a bit rash here, because the proponent of the necessity thesis might also happen to be a proponent of the sufficiency thesis, and thus hold that the ink mark is a token of the English sentence “Can you smear with water?”, given that it was produced with the “wrong intentions”. It is highly improbable that an English sentence would ever be formed by the accidental spilling of ink, so one should perhaps hesitate to draw conclusions from this version of the example. Cappelen also acknowledges this in noting that “appeals to intuitions tend to be inconclusive at this point” (Cappelen 1999: 95). However, I think he is nonetheless clearly right in maintaining that the production history of a token doesn’t determine whether or not it is a token, since there exists a very simple and straightforward way for anyone stumbling upon a token like Cappelen’s example to decide what it is a token of, which has to do with how the entities stumbled upon can be used linguistically. We could even imagine that this stumbled-upon token was in fact produced as a letter in the little-known language Hungarian, saying “Don’t you love me anymore?”, but this would not in any way preclude it from *also* being a token of an English sentence.

Cappelen points out one further consequence of Kaplan's intentionalist view, which is that on looking at the sentence "Alice is asleep", one wouldn't know whether the first token referred to Alice unless one knew the intentions and history of the utterer of the sentence (Cappelen 1999: 97). Kaplan states the relation between resemblance and intention rather oddly:

We depend heavily on resemblance between utterances and inscriptions ... in order to divine these critical intentions. If it sounds like "duck", it probably is "duck". But we also take account of accent and idiolect and all the usual clues to intention. It is the latter that decides the matter.

(Kaplan 1990: 104)

What's left in the dark here, is how "the usual clues to intention" can reasonably be said to be merely "clues to intention". We know that Kaplan is looking for some way to make a variety of occurrences of "duck" equally suggestive of the intention to pronounce or write "duck". For instance, if someone has a dialect in which "duck" is pronounced "dack", Kaplan wants to embrace this as an equally good pronunciation of "duck", thereby escaping the unattractive task of stating the standard to which every utterance should conform. The problem with this is that when the pronunciation becomes sufficiently non-standard, language users have no way in which to arrive at the actual intentions of the utterer. According to the intentionalist theory, something *just is* a token of a word given the right intention in the utterer, so what goes wrong if the listeners are all of a sudden completely unable to figure out what has been said? It is hopelessly implausible to maintain that "well, the speaker *actually* had the intention to say this and this, *therefore* he actually said this and this, so the listeners should just have paid more attention or in some other way have performed better as listeners!" It seems unavoidable to concede that the *clues to intention* weren't good enough, and if they weren't good enough, how did the listeners necessarily discover that they weren't? By "looking at (or listening to) the physical object that comes out, and looking at (or listening to) the physical object that goes in, and trying to make a phonographic comparison of the two to see whether they are similar enough in some specified way" (Kaplan 1990: 106), which according to Kaplan is precisely how we can *not* tell whether utterances are of the same word. The reference to intentions as the only and ultimate criterion for word individuation does absolutely no explanatory work, because it is dependent on the listeners'

ability to identify the various elements of the utterance or inscriptions. We may note that the way in which this is done is not in the least affected by the presence or strangeness of intention.

This is not to deny that assumptions about intentions have anything to do in communication at all; it is just to deny that they have anything to do with word individuation. Cappelen observes that "[c]ontext sensitive and ambiguous expressions are just the most obvious examples of expressions the presence of which require the interpreter to make assumptions about the speaker[']s intentions" (Cappelen 1999: 97). If you do someone a favour and they declare you to be an angel in the customary metaphorical sense of the word, this will make sense only on the basis of such an assumption. It is necessary and sufficient to know the conventional meanings of these words in order that you understand what has been said; the obvious intention of paying a compliment becomes clear from this – not the other way around. Kaplan is of course justified in kicking away the spelling ladder (Kaplan 1990: 108), but this being a justified move doesn't endow his theory with any particular credibility. It just points to a conspicuous fault in the token/type theory.

Extension of the criticism of Kaplan

I will now proceed to discussing two further difficulties in Kaplan's theory. The first concerns the relation between a word and occurrences of it according to the stage/continuant model. The second concerns the successfulness of his quest for what individuates words.

"A single word can, and typically will, have many utterances and inscriptions." (Kaplan 1990: 96) If all occurrences of words are merely occurrences *of* the words and not identical with the words, this makes it exceedingly difficult to talk about which words they are occurrences of. Let's study the case of "asparagus". Which word are all occurrences of "asparagus" occurrences of? This seems a perfectly sensible question, given that occurrences of words are supposed to be occurrences *of words*, and that the metaphysics *of words* is what interests us. The only thing I can do to answer this question, however, is to provide more and more occurrences of "asparagus". How could I reasonably declare any one in this multitude of occurrences with all their variations to *be the word*? The only option is to assume the attitude of *insisting*. "They are occurrences of *this word*: 'ASPARAGUS'!" But still I am merely providing an occurrence *of the word*, now in the profound guise of capital letters. So the view that all occurrences are

simply *of words* has the impractical consequence that one can neither use nor mention a word. It is thus far remarkably unclear what a word actually is. But in order for occurrences to be *of words*, surely words must have some kind of reality? A tempting possibility might be to conceive of a word as some kind of abstract entity to which all occurrences conform on the basis of something like a pattern which may be variously instantiated – but this seems to be precisely the kind of quasi-Platonic metaphysics of words that Kaplan is most eager to get away from. “These objects,” he writes, “the utterances and inscriptions, are the physical media by which we transmit words from one to another” (Kaplan 1990: 97). If occurrences are physical media, what is the reality of that which is transmitted by the physical media, if it’s not an abstract idea? Could it be that a word is the totality of its occurrences? This might be a more feasible view to attribute to Kaplan, but a couple of difficulties adhere to it. Firstly, this would include in the metaphysics of a word all sorts of confused uses of it. If I employ the word “*velociraptor*” in talking about my neighbour’s dog, like this: “That’s a very nice *velociraptor* you’ve got there!”, it would be a part of the meaning of “*velociraptor*” to mean “*dog*”, since one would have no criterion by which to demonstrate that some occurrences of the word were confused – what the word *is*, is nothing more than its occurrences. It would necessarily have to be a circular enterprise to show that some of these occurrences of the word were confused, as this could only be carried through with reference to what the word *really is*, which is all the occurrences of it except for the ones that are confused, all of which are confused simply because they don’t conform to what the word really is.

In a prelude to introducing repetition as the individuating element of words, Kaplan asks: “What is it that makes a particular output, the transmission of the same word as that carried by a particular earlier input?” (Kaplan 1990: 102) And we know what the answer is going to be. Allow me to contrast this question with the earlier question: “How should words be individuated?” (Kaplan 1990: 94) The latter question more obviously demands an account of what makes any one word different from all other words, whereas the former question centers on the preservation of identity, without mentioning the existence of other words at all. I now want to suggest that what could possibly have misled Kaplan, was the search for some linguistic feature

to account for the self-identity of every individual word. Before elaborating on this suspicion, I will bring attention to a conspicuous feature of the thought experiment involving the subject repeating names after a count of five. The case is very simply that this is hardly ever how communication works – extremely rarely do we engage as language users in the manner of parrots. The point is that in the vast majority of cases, we don’t employ words with the purpose of repeating anything. Of course something is being repeated – otherwise language would never come about – but it is in marginal cases that we focus on repeating. These are cases like learning a new language and imitating what the teacher says. Ordinarily, one doesn’t intend while saying “my feet hurt” to repeat anything whatsoever. So why should marginal cases like the stuttering imitation of French words for foods point to any distinguishing feature of language in general?

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A positive suggestion

I deem it firmly established by now that Kaplan’s attempt at making intentions individuating of words has not been very successful. At this point I should want to bring attention to a more fruitful way of looking at the nature of words, instead of just picking on Kaplan’s views. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure developed a theory of language as a system of differences. The distinguishing feature of these differences is that in language, “there are only differences *without positive terms*” (Saussure 1964: 120). He takes the linguistic unit of significance to be the *sign*, and the linguistic sign consists of the association of a concept and a sound-image, and refers to the concept as the *signified* and the sound-image as the *signifier* (Saussure 1964: 67). The sound-image is not the material sound, but the psychological imprint of it on our senses. “The psychological character of our sound-images becomes apparent when we observe our own speech. Without moving our lips or tongue, we can talk to ourselves or recite mentally a selection of verse.” (Saussure 1964: 66) The totality of signified and signifier amounts to the sign. He does of course not deny that words in writing are also signifiers of concepts, but the sound-image is regarded as primary, because writing is there to represent speaking, and not the other way around. Writing is ordinarily in need of a spoken language in order for it to carry any significance; this doesn’t amount to saying that an exclusively written language couldn’t carry any meaning, it is merely taking into consideration how all

natural languages ordinarily function.

Saussure states that “[t]he linguistic entity exists only through the associating of the signifier with the signified” (Saussure 1964: 102). This is to say that a sound-image without the connection to a concept has no signification, and a concept without a sound-image to signify it belongs to psychology. Only when associated with a sound-image does it become a *linguistic entity*. This, however, “is not accurately defined until it is *delimited*, i.e. separated from everything that surrounds it on the phonic chain. These delimited entities or units stand in opposition to each other in the mechanism of language” (Saussure 1964: 103). The units that are differentiated through these mutual oppositions, constitute a system of *pure values*, that is, a system where no unit has any preexisting signification before entering into the system and acquiring its meaning through the operation of a totality of signs reciprocally conditioning each other. “To prove that language is only a system of pure values, it is enough to consider the two elements involved in its functioning: ideas and sounds.” (Saussure 1964: 111) Saussure claims that apart from its expression in language, thought “is only a shapeless and indistinct mass” (Saussure 1964: 111). Ideas need to be expressed with signs in order to become clear-cut, consistent distinctions. Similarly, the phonic element of language, or sounds by themselves, would yield no predelimited entities (Saussure 1964: 112). He also maintains that the relation between the concept and the sound-image is completely arbitrary, because the values of signs are entirely relative.

In addition, the idea of value, as defined, shows that to consider a term as simply the union of a certain sound with a certain concept is grossly misleading. To define it in this way would isolate the term from its system; it would mean assuming that one can start from the terms and construct the system by adding them together when, on the contrary, it is from the interdependent whole that one must start and through analysis obtain its elements.

(Saussure 1964:113)

The interdependent whole has been said to be a system of oppositions, but this should not lead one to assuming that words acquire their meaning through merely being the opposite of their negations. Saussure’s idea is simply that words acquire their meaning through what they don’t mean, which is to say that “sheep” acquires its meaning in opposition to “goat”, “cow”, “ewe”, “lamb”, “house”, “sun” (though the latter two are of course not very informative,

there is still some opposition there), “mutton” and so on. The obvious argument in favour of this view is the following: how else would we know that “sheep” does not refer to goats and mutton? This point is completely left out by the sort of considerations Kaplan engages in. Positing language as a system of differences does not only explain in a very intuitive way how it is that we are able to keep terms that are very similar in meaning from each other; it is equally applicable to the systems of writing and speaking. “The value of letters is purely negative and differential.” (Saussure 1964: 119) This means that a *t* can be realized in infinitely different ways, as long as it is realized in a way that makes for confusion with the other letters. The same goes for the phonic elements of language: Speakers may pronounce any sound ever so differently between them, as long as they maintain the internal oppositions of the sound system. In note 12 on p. 105, Kaplan is perhaps not so far from reaching this insight, when he mentions the difficulties some of our Japanese friends have with the R-L distinction. The reason is just that this distinction doesn’t correspond to a significant distinction in Japanese phonology, just as a speaker of English or Norwegian might not pick up the differences between aspirated and non-aspirated plosives in languages such as Sanskrit or Ancient Greek. “Read” and “lead” are phonologically different only through the oppositional relation.

Conclusion

Kaplan set out to investigate how words are individuated, and took as his clue the intentional repetition of words. This investigation, however, turned into the question of what preserves the identity of words, and would say nothing about the relations of different words to each other. It seems that not only has Kaplan not been able to give a feasible account of what individuates words; he has started out from the completely misconstrued assumption that one can study languages on a level of identities pertaining to single words, in abstraction from what in light of Saussure’s theory very obviously turns out to be a system of interdependent values where no unit has any significance outside of the totality of the system. In themselves, words mean nothing; in opposition to all other words, they acquire the pure values which constitute the phenomenon of language in general.

LITERATURE

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