

## SOME REMARKS ON PERRY'S REFLEXIVE CONTENT AND COGNITIVE SIGNIFICANCE<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In this paper I present and discuss the solution offered by John Perry to Frege's Puzzle in terms of the reflexive content of utterances. I first discuss his purported solution for the indexical version of the Puzzle, and argue that reflexive content cannot explain the triviality of some utterances. If this is right, then reflexive content is not the sort of thing that accounts for cognitive significance adequately. I then discuss Perry's solution for the Puzzle as arising for proper names. I argue that, even if reflexive content does explain cognitive significance in this case, it does not do so in terms of the meaning of expressions, as Perry originally intended.

**Keywords:** reference; cognitive significance; reflexive content; Frege's Puzzle.

Frege's Puzzle is the problem of explaining how coreferential expressions can nevertheless have different cognitive significance. The Puzzle can be roughly stated as follows: how can sentences of the form  $a=a$  be trivial and sentences of the form  $a=b$  be informative if  $a$  and  $b$  refer to the same thing? Take sentences "Cicero is Cicero" and "Cicero is

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Tully” for example. It seems clear that the first is utterly uninteresting, whereas the second apparently conveys relevant historical knowledge. It may be completely silly to be told the first, while it can be very informative to be told the second. One speaker might accept the first unquestionably and vehemently deny the second. How is this possible if both names – “Cicero” and “Tully” – refer to the *same* object? How come they have different cognitive significance? This puzzle has bothered philosophers since Frege (1960a, 1960b) first discussed it. And this problem is not restricted to proper names. Indexical sentences like “that is that” or “he is he”, uttered in the appropriate circumstances, can be informative despite referring to the same object twice.

Frege believed that the differences in the epistemic profiles of these expressions must be explained by differences in their *meaning*. For this reason, he thought that any semantic theory *ought* to be able to account for cognitive significance. In other words, he believed that a solution to Frege’s Puzzle ought to be given on semantic grounds. Wettstein (1986) called this idea the *Frege’s criterion of adequacy* for semantics. Frege (1960b) satisfied this criterion by distinguishing between the *sense* of an expression and its *reference*. The sense of an expression constitutes its semantic contribution to the proposition expressed<sup>3</sup> and it provides a cognitive perspective over its referent. “Cicero” and “Tully”, despite having the same reference, express different senses, thus explaining why their epistemic profiles are distinct. Senses, therefore, guarantee the required connection between semantics and epistemology.

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<sup>3</sup> Or, as Frege (1960b) would put it, its contribution to the *thought* expressed by a complete sentence.

Many philosophers, even endorsing the so-called direct reference theory (which is anti-Fregean by nature), share Frege's intuition that cognitive significance is an aspect of meaning. For this reason, they accept Frege's criterion of adequacy for semantics despite rejecting his theory of sense and reference. The problem is that direct reference theorists hold that the semantic content of singular terms, like indexicals and proper names, is *exhausted by their reference*. Therefore, any coreferential singular terms have identical semantic contents. They make the *same* contribution to the proposition being expressed. If this is right, how can sentences of the form  $a=a$  and  $a=b$  have different cognitive significance if  $a$  and  $b$  have the same content? In other words, why do these sentences have distinct epistemic profiles if they express the same proposition?

John Perry is one of those direct reference theorists who share Frege's intuitions about cognitive significance. He tried to explain how this is possible through his notion of *reflexive content*. According to Perry, reflexive content is able to account for cognitive significance without abandoning direct reference, and it does so by appealing to certain aspects of the meaning of the relevant expressions, just as Frege recommended. In this paper, I present and discuss Perry's purported account. I argue that reflexive content, even if it is able to solve the puzzle of cognitive significance, it cannot do so on semantic grounds, and hence does not meet Frege's criterion of adequacy for semantics. In fact, there are reasons to believe that it does not solve the Puzzle *at all*.

Let us start with Perry's solution to the indexical version of the Puzzle. But first, a word about indexicals and how direct reference theorists have traditionally dealt with

them. Indexicals are linguistic expressions that have different semantic contents depending on the context of their utterance. The clearest cases of indexical words are words like “I”, “you”, “me”, “here”, “now”, “this”, “that”: depending on the occasion of their use, they refer or designate different things.

For Perry (1977), indexicals have two levels of meaning. One is what he called the *role* of the indexical and the other is its *value*. The distinction between these two types of meaning is fairly intuitive. As we saw, the semantic content of an indexical shifts from context to context. However, it seems evident that despite this shift of semantic content there is something that remains stable in every use of an indexical. In every utterance of “he”, for instance, there is something that keeps constant despite the fact that this indexical can be used to refer to different people. This “something in common” present in every utterance of an indexical is what Perry (1977) called the *role* of the indexical, and what Kaplan (1989) called its *character* (since “character” is the standard terminology in this debate, I will use it instead of “role”). The character is the linguistic rule of use of the relevant expression. Since linguistic rules are fixed by the linguistic conventions, it is plausible to define the character of an indexical as its *linguistic meaning*. Most importantly, the character is the semantic feature of indexicals that *determines their value* in a context and it is associated with indexicals *as types*. The character of “he”, for example, is something like “the discriminated male”.

Value – or *content*, as Kaplan (1989) called it – is what is determined by the character in the context (like “character”, “content” is the standard term for the semantic content of an indexical, so I shall stick to it hereafter). The

content of an indexical is the contribution it makes to the proposition being expressed. For direct reference theorists, the content of an indexical expression is what is referred to in the occasion of its use. When I utter “he is tall”, for instance, the content of the indexical “he” will be the object being demonstrated. Put another way, it is the *referent* of the indexical that is its semantic content, not its character. This, of course, is the fundamental difference between Fregean semantics and direct reference: it is the *object itself* that constitutes the content of singular terms, not some sort of qualitative or descriptive material. Indexicals, therefore, express singular propositions (propositions that have objects as their constituents) whenever they are used.

Kaplan (1989), and initially Perry (1977, 1979) as well, believed that the character is able to play the epistemic role of Fregean senses: different characters would entail different cognitive significance, and identity of character would entail identity of cognitive significance. But think of the following instance of the indexical version of the Puzzle. Imagine that I am being told that “he is he”, where the speaker is pointing to the same person twice in such a way that this utterance is informative – pointing to a man depicted in a photograph and to the same man in our vicinities, for example. The character of the indexical “he” (its linguistic meaning) is the same in both of its utterances, and both of them obviously refer to the same object. Yet, this utterance is informative: I might be really surprised to learn that the man in the photograph is the same man in front of me. But why? The two levels of meaning – character and content – are identical in this case.

This is essentially the problem Wettstein (1986) raised to the Perry/Kaplan solution to Frege's Puzzle in terms of

character. As this objection seems to show, the same character is involved twice in an utterance, so it should turn out trivial; yet, it does not<sup>4</sup>. Wettstein concluded that the failure of the Perry/Kaplan semantic framework to account for the Puzzle gives us very good reasons to abandon Frege's criterion of adequacy for semantics. In other terms, if the best direct reference semantics cannot accommodate this epistemic dimension of language, then it seems that cognitive significance is not an aspect of meaning after all. Thus, a solution to the Puzzle should not be pursued within semantics.

Perry (1988) is a response to this problem and an attempt to avoid this drastic conclusion. Perry claimed that, besides character and content, we must distinguish between the proposition *expressed* by an utterance and the proposition *created* by an utterance. He argued that the latter is what explains cognitive significance. The proposition expressed by an utterance *u* is its official content (or content<sub>C</sub>, in later terminology)<sup>5</sup>. This proposition is what we would normally regard as *what is said* by utterance *u* in the context, i.e., its referential truth conditions. If I utter "I am hungry" in a given context, for example, the proposition *expressed* is the singular proposition containing me and the property of being hungry as its ingredients. It is what we intuitively regard as what I literally express with the utter-

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<sup>4</sup> Kaplan's (1989) theory is more nuanced than expounded here. Kaplan stresses the importance of *demonstrations* in the use of indexicals like "he" or "that". Demonstrations (e.g. pointing gestures, referential intentions) have characters as well, so the two occurrences of "he" in this case of "he is he" would end up with different characters, thus explaining why this utterance is informative. Wettstein (1986) overlooks this point in his criticism. However, as Taschek (1987) pointed out, resorting to demonstrations as Kaplan conceived them does not help to account for some other instances of the Puzzle. Perry's solution *via* reflexive content is supposed to circumvent all these problems.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Perry (1997), p. 11.

ance.

On the other hand, the proposition created (or content<sub>M</sub>)<sup>6</sup> by an utterance *u* is the proposition which is generated on the occasion of its production. This proposition has *the utterance itself* as constituent. This created proposition, which Perry calls the *reflexive content* of an utterance, states the conditions under which the utterance *u* is true. This kind of propositional content is determined solely by the linguistic meaning associated with the sentence-type of which utterance *u* is a token. Put another way, the reflexive content is a product of the occasion of an utterance and of the linguistic rules which are attached to the relevant linguistic expressions. These linguistic rules, as we saw, can be thought of as characters. Note also that the speaker does not need to explicitly and consciously think about the reflexive content of an utterance; since this sort of content is derived from linguistic rules, it is presumably grasped automatically and effortlessly by every competent speaker of the language.

Let us see an example. Consider a situation in which, pointing to a certain professor, I utter to you “she is really brilliant”. According to Perry, to fully account for what goes on in this situation, we must distinguish between various levels of meaning. First, there is the character of “she” and of “is really brilliant”, which is associated to these expressions as types by the linguistic norms. Second, there is the proposition I literally express in this context, which is the official content (content<sub>C</sub>), of my utterance: the singular proposition containing the professor and the property of being brilliant. Third, there is the reflexive content (con-

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<sup>6</sup> Idem.

tent<sub>M</sub>), which is something along the lines of

(a) There is one discriminated female *x* which is the referent of *this utterance* of “she is really brilliant”, and *x* is really brilliant<sup>7</sup>.

The same goes for every indexical that occurs in an utterance of a complete sentence. For example, the reflexive content of an utterance of “you” will be “the addressee of *this utterance* of ‘you’”; the reflexive content of an utterance of “here” will be “the place which is referred to by *this utterance* of ‘here’”, and so on. As we can see, the reflexive content *does not contain the referent as an ingredient*; it contains only the utterance *u* itself and a general description of the referent in terms of the context and its relation to the utterance *u*.

This is why, according to Perry, one can in some sense understand *every utterance* of “she is really brilliant” even if one does not know the referent of “she” in the context: every utterance *u* of this sentence-type creates a proposition that states the conditions that must be met in order for utterance *u* to be true in the relevant context. These conditions, as said above, are derived from the linguistic meanings – the characters– of the relevant expressions. Thus, the hearer grasps the created proposition even if she does not grasp the official content expressed by the utterance. More importantly, since the reflexive content of an utterance has *the utterance itself* and its relevant parts as constituents, each utterance of an indexical will contribute a different ingredient to the created proposition. Every time I say “he” in an utterance, for example, a new constituent

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Perry (1988), p. 7.



is loaded into the reflexive content of the full utterance.

This is why, according to Perry, utterances containing coreferential indexicals like “he is he” can be informative. Although the official content of both utterances of “he” is identical – the man himself –, the contributions they make to the reflexive content are distinct. And since the reflexive content describes the referent in terms of its relation to the context and to the utterances themselves, and since the utterances of “he” are numerically distinct, the proposition created by “he is he” in the context will contain two *different descriptions* of the referent. Put another way, the reflexive content will contain a description of the referent in terms of its relation to the *first* utterance of “he” and a description of the referent in terms of its relation to the *second* utterance of “he”. Hence, these descriptions provide different cognitive perspectives over the referent. In short, the referent is the same, but the two utterances of “he” have different reflexive contents, and thus they differ in cognitive significance. As Corazza and Dokic (1992, p. 187) put it, although characters do not determine cognitive significance directly, they do so when *applied* to a particular utterance. Perry’s reflexive content, since it is clearly an aspect of (applied) meaning, respects the Fregean criterion of adequacy for semantics.

However, if we individuate cognitive significance in terms of utterances and their reflexive content, numerically different utterances should *always* have different cognitive significance, for each new utterance will generate a new reflexive content. After all, utterances are unrepeatable and always numerically distinct (at least in non-extraordinary circumstances). However, this is clearly not the case. We have many blatantly *trivial* instances of “he is he”, “this is

this”, or even of “that is an F” (said twice pointing to a static object) etc., even though their reflexive contents are distinct. In other terms, every utterance of an indexical will contribute *itself* to the created proposition, and so their reflexive content will always be different; hence, if cognitive significance is individuated in terms of reflexive content, different utterances should always differ in their epistemic profile. But this is obviously not the case<sup>8</sup>. Reflexive content is simply *too* fine-grained to individuate cognitive significance correctly, at least for indexicals. Perry’s solution solves the problem of informativeness but creates a problem for explaining triviality. And triviality, of course, is just the flipside of Frege’s Puzzle.

Now, let us see how reflexive content deals with the name version of the Puzzle. The Puzzle for names, as we saw above, is the problem of explaining why sentences like “Cicero is Cicero” are trivial whereas sentences like “Cicero is Tully” are not. Perry offered two solutions, one in Perry (1988) and the other in Perry (1997). Let us start with the former. In that paper, Perry claims that there is a piece of information that is connected to “Cicero is Tully” that is not connected to “Cicero is Cicero” despite the fact that they express the same proposition: the *metalinguistic* information that “Cicero” and “Tully” stand for the same thing (PERRY, 1988, p. 12). This information is expressed in a proposition such as

(b) “Cicero” and “Tully” refer to the same object.

This information, then, is not expressed at the level of

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<sup>8</sup> Corazza & Dokic (1992) and Loeffler (2001) make the same point about Perry’s reflexive content.

the official or truth-conditional content, but at the level of the *reflexive* content of an utterance of “Cicero is Tully”. Put another way, a speaker who is competent with both “Cicero” and “Tully” may nevertheless acquire new information upon being told that “Cicero is Tully”, and this information is expressed in the reflexive content by containing the *very names* “Cicero” and “Tully”. This is why “Cicero is Tully” is informative whereas “Cicero is Cicero” is not.

This is all well, except for one thing: contrary to the reflexive content of indexical sentences, this metalinguistic information is not in any sense derived from the *meanings* of the names in question. Perry, being a direct reference theorist, believes that all there is to the meaning of a name is its referent, so “Cicero” and “Tully” simply mean the same thing. Their semantic properties are completely identical. The reflexive proposition (b), therefore, is not in any sense derived from the meanings of these proper names. It expresses information about English *sentences* and *names qua syntactic objects*. This is not even a solution in terms of *applied* linguistic meanings, as was the solution to the indexical version of the Puzzle. In short, this sort of metalinguistic information is *pre-semantic*. Hence, if Perry wants to explain cognitive significance in terms of *meaning*, he cannot appeal to this kind of metalinguistic information to do so. This information is simply outside the realm of semantics. In fact, this metalinguistic strategy is very similar to Salmon's (1986) strategy for accounting for the Puzzle. As is well known, Salmon does not sympathize with Frege's criterion of adequacy for semantics.

As I said earlier, in his (1988) paper Perry was trying to answer Wettstein's (1986) challenge to Frege's criterion of

adequacy for semantics. However, Perry's interpretation of that paper is not entirely correct. He interpreted Wettstein as claiming that, since the propositional content of "Cicero is Cicero" and "Cicero is Tully" is identical – the proposition that *Cicero is self-identical* –, there is no difference whatsoever between their cognitive significance, and hence there is nothing for direct reference theorists to worry about. Perry's solution sketched above clearly meets *this* challenge. After all, there *is* an important difference between the cognitive significance of "Cicero is Cicero" and "Cicero is Tully", and this fact could possibly be explained by Perry's reflexive content. But that is not what Wettstein was claiming in that paper. He was claiming that it is not *semantics'* business to explain cognitive significance, not that there is no phenomena of cognitive significance at all. And this challenge is not successfully met by Perry (1988), since his solution is not based on any semantic properties of proper names. Unfortunately, the solution he offered in his (1997) is not able to meet it either. Let us see why.

In Perry (1997), his theory of reflexive content is a little bit different. He claims that, for an utterance *g* of the sentence "David uses LISP", for example, its reflexive content is something like

*R*: There is a person *x* and a convention *C* such that

- (i) *C* is exploited by *g*;
- (ii) *C* permits one to designate *x* with "David";
- (iii) *x* uses LISP<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Perry (1997), p. 8.

A convention *C* for Perry is the convention that is established in a baptism ceremony. As he puts it, “When a person or thing is assigned a name, a *permissive convention* is established: that name *may* be used to designate that person” (PERRY, 1997, p. 6). So, when we use names, we are exploiting these conventions, and it is in virtue of them that we refer to the objects we do. Essentially, then, conventions *C* are things like Kripke’s causal-historical chains, which determine the referent of a given token of a name, and they are part of a given utterance’s reflexive content *R*. Furthermore, *R* is known by every competent speaker: even if we do not know who the referent of “David” is, we would still grasp *R* because we know how language works and how names refer.

This is presumably why sentences like “Cicero is Tully” can be informative (Perry does not explicitly talk about these cases in that paper): these names exploit different conventions, *C* and *C'*, and this fact is expressed by the reflexive content of the sentence “Cicero is Tully”. Conversely, this also explains why “Cicero is Cicero” is trivial: the same convention is being exploited twice, and this information is encoded in its reflexive content. Since all competent speakers grasp reflexive contents effortlessly, this is not something too esoteric. Contents *R* like the above are easily available for the speaker’s cognition every time an utterance is produced.

However, Perry believes that these conventions *C* are not in any sense an aspect of the *meaning* of the names they introduce. They are not like the characters of indexicals that, in a context, determine the referent. The determination of reference is done *before* any semantic evaluation. Conventions *C*, then, are pre-semantic. I quote:

The role of context in resolving the issues of which naming conventions are being exploited is quite different from its role with indexicals. In the case of indexicals, the meaning of a given expression determines that certain specific contextual relationships to the utterance and utterer—who is speaking, or to whom, or when—determine designation. Different facts are relevant for different indexicals, and the meaning of the indexical determines which. *Names don't work like this*. The difference between “David” and “Harold” is not that they are tied, *by their meanings*, to different relationships to the utterance or utterer. The role of context is simply to help us narrow down the possibilities for the permissive conventions that are being exploited (PERRY, 1997, p. 7, italics mine).

As we can see, Perry believes that conventions *C* are not in any sense encoded at any level of the meaning of a proper name. They are external relations that fix its reference. Figuring out which relation is being exploited and thus which thing is being referred to is a matter of contextual ingenuity for sure. But this is not something that is determined by meanings, or even by applied meanings, as happens with indexical expressions. Discovering which name and which permissive convention is at play is like figuring out which sense of the word “bank” is intended in a given utterance of “Mary went to the bank”: there are no rules built into the meaning of “bank” that tell us which meaning is being intended in this situation. If this is correct, then Perry’s (1997) proposal does not explain cognitive significance on semantic grounds, and it fails to meet Frege’s criterion of adequacy for semantics. Wettstein’s challenge remains unscathed.

In fact, I am not sure that this proposal is able to account for cognitive significance *at all*. Take Kripke’s (2011) famous Paderewski case. Imagine that Peter is a huge fan of the polish pianist called “Paderewski”. Peter longs to meet him and to get his autograph. Imagine also that Peter

has nothing but contempt for the polish politician “Paderewski”. However, unbeknownst to him, they are the very same person. It can be informative for him (and certainly shocking) to be told that “Paderewski is Paderewski”. But how is this possible? Arguably, both occurrences of “Paderewski” are occurrences of *the same name*, since they exploit exactly the same permissive convention: Paderewski was baptized only *once* with the name “Paderewski”, not twice. The reflexive contents of both occurrences of “Paderewski”, therefore, are identical, since they exploit the same convention *C*. If this is correct, then the utterance ought to be trivial, but it is not.

Note that I am not claiming here that Perry's reflexive content is implausible *qua* theory of content. I am just claiming that it cannot account for Frege's Puzzle as Perry believed. If I am right, then Wettstein's claim that we have reasons to reject Frege's criterion of adequacy for semantics is considerably strengthened, for one of the most promising semantic solutions to Frege's Puzzle available to direct reference theorists is inadequate. Cognitive significance seems to depend on things *external* to official or reflexive contents, like contexts, background knowledge, speakers' intentions, and so on. In order to find a plausible solution, it would not hurt to look more attentively to pragmatics and not so much to semantics.

**Resumo:** Neste artigo, apresento e discuto a solução oferecida por John Perry para o Problema de Frege em termos do conteúdo reflexivo de elocuições. Em primeiro lugar, discuto sua solução para a versão indexical do Problema de Frege, e argumento que o conteúdo reflexivo não pode explicar a trivialidade de certas elocuições. Se isso está correto, então o conteúdo reflexivo não é o tipo de coisa que explica adequadamente o valor cognitivo. Depois, discuto a solução de Perry para o Problema de Frege envolvendo nomes próprios. Argumento que, mesmo que esse conteúdo explique o valor cognitivo, ele não o faz em termos do significado das expressões, como Perry pre-

tendia originalmente.

**Palavras-chave:** Referência; valor cognitivo; conteúdo reflexivo; Problema de Frege.

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