Kinds of Context: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Proper Names and Indexicals*

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Let us begin with my name. We substitute ‘B.R.’ for ‘I’ or ‘you’ or ‘he’, as the case may be, because ‘B.R.’ is a public appellation, appearing on my passport and my identity card. If a policeman says “Who are you?” I might reply saying “Look! this is who I am”, but this information is not what the policeman wants, so I produce my identity card and he is satisfied. (Russell; 1948: 101)

In this paper I shall concentrate on two linguistic tools: proper names and indexicals. Proper names such as ‘David Seaman’, ‘Paris’, ‘San Marino’, etc. can be viewed as tools enabling us to label people, objects, places, etc. and to collect and pass information about the individuals so named. Their proper function is to enable the speaker and audience to collect information about individuals and to keep track of them. Since we are not omniscient beings, we are precluded from knowing individuals and keeping track of them under all their properties across time. We are thus in the need of a tool of reference differing from a descriptive method of identification. In other words, we need linguistic tools that allow us to pick out objects and keep track of them, not by virtue of their contingent and ephemeral properties, but simply by working as tags for these objects. Proper names play this specific role. On the other hand, indexicals such as ‘now’, ‘here’, ‘today’, ‘this’, ‘she’, ‘I’, etc. can be viewed as tools enabling us to single out objects, periods, locations, persons, etc.

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relative to our surroundings. Their proper function is to enable the speaker to single out an object in relation to her enclosing. Because of this peculiarity, Russell (1940, 1948) characterized these expressions egocentric particulars:

I give the name ‘egocentric particular’ to words of which the meaning varies with the speaker and his position in time and space. The four fundamental words of this sort are ‘I’, ‘this’, ‘here’ and ‘now’. (Russell; 1940: 100)

In what follows I shall concentrate on indexicals and proper names. In particular, I shall focus on: (i) how we manipulate them, (ii) the different competencies required for this exercise and (iii) how we exploit extralinguistic context when we use them.

My aim is twofold. On the one hand I shall claim that proper names and indexicals are distinct and irreducible tools of reference. On the other hand, I shall show how the Kaplanian framework in particular, and the framework of direct reference in general, is best understood within the background of a Wittgensteinian conception of language. In particular, is best appreciated in considering Wittgenstein’s notions of language-game, form of life and practice. I shall argue that Kaplan’s consumerist semantics is Wittgensteinian in spirit. It goes without saying, though, that my use and understanding of Wittgenstein’s writings does not necessarily reflect the whole of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Actually, it may be the case that my reading and understanding of Wittgenstein has been influenced by Kaplan’s work in particular and the writing within the direct reference tradition in general. Be that as it may, I take the comparison to be rather instructive.

1. Anchored vs. Unanchored Information

To begin with, consider the following scenario. At a party, Jane, a long term admirer of Kaplan’s theory of demonstratives, knowing

1. I can refer to Saturday May 12 2002 using ‘tomorrow’ because today is Friday May 11 2002. The reference depends on the time I utter ‘tomorrow’. It is in this sense that I mean that reference depends on one’s enclosing or surrounding broadly understood. I discussed temporal indexicals and temporal terms in Corazza (2002).

2. “Here the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.” (Wittgenstein; PI; § 23) “What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life.” (Wittgenstein; PI; 226)
that Kaplan is among the guests, approaches Jon, the party organizer, and asks him:

(1) Do you know which person David Kaplan is?

Jon’s answer is:

(2) That man [indicating Kaplan] is David Kaplan.³

A minute later Sue, fascinated by the charisma of a man who is drinking martini and is entertaining a few ladies, approaches Jon and asks him:

(3) Do you know who that man [indicating Kaplan] is?

Jon’s answer is:

(4) That man is David Kaplan.

Without doubt, both Jane and Sue are interested in Kaplan. Their interest, though, is guided by different goals.

Jane has some information about David Kaplan. She knows that someone named ‘David Kaplan’, the author of “Demonstratives”, is attending the party. She may also know that Kaplan is professor at UCLA, that he is a garden expert with special interest in orchids, etc. Jane may have lot of information about David Kaplan. She could also possess some information applying only to Kaplan such as, for instance, Kaplan’s date of birth and genealogical tree, his social security number, etc. She may even be in possession of a blueprint of Kaplan’s DNA. Nonetheless, she is unable to single out Kaplan among the party attendants. In a sense, Jane does not know who Kaplan is; hence her question. To recognize Kaplan, Jane relies on Jon. She knows that Kaplan is such and such but this kind of knowledge may not suffice in enabling her to single out Kaplan and thus to know who he is. Knowing that Kaplan has such and such properties may not lead someone to know who Kaplan is or, at least, to know which person Kaplan is.⁴

Sue, on the other hand, may have no idea about Kaplan’s existence. She may have never heard about him. Like Jane, Sue is inter-

³. Jon’s answer could also have been: “He [pointing to Kaplan] is Kaplan”. For in using ‘he’ instead of ‘that man’ Jon would have reached the same goal.
⁴. It is worth mentioning that the fact that one knows who someone is does not eliminate the cognitive puzzles (e.g. Frege’s puzzle). Lois knows who Clark Kent is and who Superman is. She does not know though, that Clark Kent is Superman.
interested in Kaplan. But she is interested in Kaplan *qua* man she currently perceives. In a sense she does not know who Kaplan is as well, hence her question. To know who the man she perceives is, she must rely on Jon as well.

Jane’s and Sue’s difference in attitude toward Kaplan, as it is manifested by the different questions they ask, can be captured in distinguishing between two kinds of information one can have about a given object. On the one hand, we have the information one associates with proper names. On the other hand, we have the information one associates with demonstrative expressions. I shall characterize the latter *anchored information* and the former *unanchored information*. To know *who* Kaplan is, both Jane and Sue need to entertain the thought that *that man is Kaplan*.

These distinct types of information rest, or so I claim, on the difference between proper names and indexicals, i.e., on the different way indexicals and proper names contribute in bridging the gap between language, thought and reality. In the next section I shall spell out how proper names and indexicals differ and, in particular, the different competencies one manifests when using them. I shall argue, *pace* Burge (1973), Almog (1981), Recanati (1993), Voltolini (1995), Pelczar & Rainsbury (1998), to name just few, in favor of the thesis that proper names cannot be reduced to, or explained away in terms of, indexicals.5

2. Indexicals vs. Proper Names

Thanks to Castañeda, Kaplan, Kamp and Perry’s seminal work it is nowadays a triviality to claim that indexical expressions are context sensitive, that is, their reference depends on the context in which they are used. If you change the context of use (the speaker, the time, and the place) you may end up with different referents. It is also common knowledge that the best way to capture this platitude

5. “Indexical reference is personal, ephemeral, confrontational, and executive. Hence it is not reducible to nonindexical reference to what is not confronted. Conversely, nonindexical reference is not reducible to indexical reference.” (Castañeda; 1989: 70) As for proper names, Barcan Marcus summarises my position as follows: “Proper names have a logically irreducible use. They permit us to entertain a separation in language of the object under discussion from its properties.” (Barcan Marcus; 1975: 107)
is via Kaplan’s content/character distinction. Character is represented by a function from context to content. The character of ‘I’, for instance, is represented by a function of the form “The utterer of this token” which takes as its argument the context and gives as its value the referent, the speaker. The relevant contextual parameters needed to fix an indexical reference are the agent, the time and the place.

Not all indexical expressions, though, work the way ‘I’, ‘now’, ‘here’, ‘today’, etc. do. The character of so-called demonstrative expressions like ‘this’, ‘that’, ‘she’, etc. is incomplete. Sure, ‘this’, unlike ‘that’, suggests proximity, just as ‘she’ suggests that the referent is a female. Nonetheless, it is often the case that, when using a demonstrative expression, something extra is needed to fix the reference. When facing several women, we may appeal to a pointing gesture to single out the referent of ‘she’. If the pointing gesture is not appropriate, because it is impolite to single someone out by pointing at her, we may end up using a complex demonstrative of the form ‘that brunette with a red shirt near the window’, etc.

To capture the difference between expressions whose character is complete and those that have an incomplete one we can, once again, follow Kaplan in distinguishing between pure indexicals and demonstratives. Roughly, a demonstrative without an associated demonstration is incomplete, for the linguistic rule which governs its use is not sufficient to determine its referent in each context of use. A pure indexical, on the other hand, does not rest on an associated demonstration; any demonstration supplied is either for emphasis or irrelevant.

6. See Kaplan (1977). To be precise, in Kaplan’s logical framework the content is a function from circumstances of evaluation to extensions. Henceforth I shall forget these subtleties for Kaplan’s distinctions between context of utterance and circumstance of evaluation and between content and extension does not affect my argument, i.e. they do not concern the difference between proper names and indexicals. These distinctions are relevant when one deals with modal (and temporal) operators.

7. “[A] sign consisting of the word ‘this’ and a gesture has a different meaning from a sign consisting of the word ‘this’ and another gesture. . . . ‘This is beautiful and this is not beautiful’ is not a complete sentence, because these words have to have gestures going with them.” (Wittgenstein; RPP1: § 39)


9. “The mouth which says ‘I’ or the hand which is raised to indicate that it is I who wish to speak, or I who have toothache, does not thereby point to anything . . . The man who cries out with pain, or says that he is in pain, doesn’t choose the mouth which says it . . . If, in saying ‘I’ I point to my own body, I model the use of ‘I’ on that of the demonstrative ‘this person’ or ‘he’.” (Wittgenstein; BB: 71)
woman/. . . is in my class” the pointing gesture is needed to fix the reference. The pointing gesture per se, though, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition. One can successfully use a demonstrative expression without pointing. Besides, one’s pointing gesture can be off target. Kaplan (1989) circumvents these difficulties in arguing that with demonstrative expressions reference is fixed by the directing intention:

The directing intention is the element that differentiates the ‘meaning’ of one syntactic occurrence of a demonstrative from another, creating the potential for distinct referents, and creating the actuality of equivocation. (Kaplan; 1989: 588)

As I understand it, the directing intention does not coincide, though, with the individual one intends to talk about, i.e. the individual one has in mind. If, believing that the man in front of me is Fabio Capello, I claim “That man is the famous AS Roma manager” I have Capello in mind and I intend to tell something about Capello. If, unbeknownst to me, though, the man in front of me is not Capello but say, Sir Alex Ferguson, I do refer to Sir Alex Ferguson, regardless of my having Capello in mind. For my primary intention is to refer to the man in front of me, not to the man I have in mind. It is this communicative intention that I take to be the directing intention. For this reason it may be better to label it directing attention. The directing attention can be viewed as resting on the communal practice of using demonstrative expressions. One masters the use of a demonstrative expression when one is able to exploit both the linguistic features and the features available from one’s surrounding in order to single out an object of discourse. In using ‘she’, for instance, a speaker expects to refer to a female (this is given by the meaning of the demonstrative, i.e., by the fact that ‘she’ is gender-sensitive). To single out the relevant object the speaker must also know how to exploit features available from the context in which the linguistic interchange occurs, such as a physical gesture, a glimpse, a previous remark, etc. In a word, when using a demonstrative expression the speaker is responsible with this very use, for fixing the reference; our competent speaker makes the best use of the traits available from the context. We can thus propose the following thesis:

10. “And what does ‘pointing to the shape’, ‘pointing to the color’ consist in? Point to a piece of paper. – And now point to its shape – now its color – now its number (that sounds queer) – How did you do it?” (Wittgenstein; PI: § 33)
• Demonstrative reference rests on the directing attention, which is not required in the case of pure indexicals.

With pure indexicals, the situation is more straightforward. When one uses a pure indexical one automatically refers to the relevant item. If one uses ‘today’, one refers to the relevant day regardless of one’s intention. The simple act of uttering that word suffices to fix the reference. The understanding of a pure indexical rests on the grasping of the contextual parameters. One does not understand a use of ‘I’, for instance, if one does not understand who the agent of the utterance is. The contextual parameters are constantly exploited, they are part of what is said and communicated and have to be grasped for the message to be successful, while directing attentions are not part of what one says and primarily aims to communicate.11

Unlike indexicals (either demonstratives or pure indexicals), proper names can be used to refer to an object even if the speaker and hearer are not and have never been “in contact” with the referent. When you and I use ‘Aristotle’ we both refer to the same individual and we may understand each other even if Aristotle is not, and has never been, in our perceptual field:

We said that the sentence “Excalibur has a sharp blade” made sense even when Excalibur was broken in pieces. Now this is so because in this language-game a name is also used in the absence of its bearer. But we can imagine a language-game with names (that is, with signs which we should certainly include among names) in which they are used only in the presence of the bearer; and so could always be replaced by a demonstrative pronoun and the gesture of pointing. (Wittgenstein; PI: § 44)

Since proper names are usually used in the absence of their bearer, they do not rely on the context of use to fix their reference. The context of reference fixing and the context of utterance are often different. It goes without saying that during a baptism or dubbing, the context of utterance and the context of reference fixing are the same. This, though, is not the paradigmatic use of a proper name –

11. For a more exhaustive discussion of the first person pronoun ‘I’ and how its referent may differ from the writer or speaker, see Corazza et als. (2002). For the simplicity of my argument, in this paper I ignore cases where indexicals are used in fictional or historical discourse, in answering machines and similar devices. On a way in which the first person pronoun can be understood within a Wittgensteinian framework, see Corazza (2001).
usually an individual gets baptized only once in her life. We do not perform an act of baptism each time we utter a proper name:

Proper names serve as a long finger of ostension over time and place. On this account 'proper name' is a semantical, not a merely syntactical notion. Reference is supposed. We may mistakenly believe of some syntactically proper name, say 'Homer', that it has an actual singular referent and is a genuine proper name, but if its use does not finally link it to a singular object, it is not a genuine name at all. . . . Proper names have fixed values in our language as a historical institution and are part of the public vocabulary. In this way they allow reference to an object despite the vicissitudes the objects undergo and despite the absence of direct acquaintance with many and perhaps most of the objects that the language user correctly names. (Marcus; 1985/6: 203–4)

One of the reasons we need proper names is that we want to be able to keep track and speak of objects that are not in our perceptual field.12

The general point I would like to draw is that the use of a proper name does not appeal to context in the same way the use of an indexical does. Sure, the context may affect the referent of a given label: in the context of gossiping about Jackie Kennedy's lovers 'Aristotle' refers to Aristotle Onassis, while in a philosophical discussion, it refers to the philosopher. To evade confusion it is worth stressing that I am not claiming that Aristotle Onassis and Aristotle the philosopher share the same name, for I take proper names to be unique. They are like private properties one cannot transfer to someone else:

There is a traditional distinction between 'proper' names and 'class' names, which is explained as consisting in the fact that a proper name applies, essentially, to only one object, whereas a class name applies to all objects of a certain kind, however numerous they may be. Thus 'Napoleon' is a proper name, while 'man' is a class name. (Russell; 1948: 87)

Indexicals, on the other hand, are not unique. It does not make sense to claim that, 'you', for instance, is the unique label of a given addressee or 'today' the unique name of a given day. The picture I

12. “And there is also the language-game of inventing a name for something, and hence of saying, ‘This is . . . ’ and then using the new name. (Thus, for example, children give names to their dolls and then talk about them and to them. Think in this connection how singular is the use of a person’s name to call him!)” (Wittgenstein; PI: § 27)
have in mind bears some similarities to Kaplan’s (1990) distinction between proper names and generic names. A generic name is what parents look at when they choose how to name their baby: it is what we find in books such as *A Thousand Ways of Naming Your Kid* and attached to some key rings. A proper name, on the other hand, is intrinsically linked to the object it names. So Aristotle Onassis and Aristotle the philosopher, like David Kaplan and David Seaman, bear *distinct*, though homophonically and syntactically indistinguishable, proper names.13 The words ‘Aristotle’ and ‘David’, by means of which both the philosopher and the magnate on the one hand and the philosopher and the football player on the other, are called are not, properly speaking, proper names. They are *generic* names from which infinitely many distinct proper names can be drawn and created.14 The latter are best understood in naturalistic terms, as natural objects usually created with an act of dubbing or baptism, i.e., as objects which come into existence, stay around for a while and then may disappear:

One might think of them [proper names] as trees. Stemming out from their creation, with physical and mental segments; the mental segment able to produce many physical branches and able to merge many physical branches. . . . At any rate, they are objects of the created realm, created by language makers.” (Kaplan; 1990: 117)

The reference of a proper name is not fixed in the same way in which the reference of an indexical is fixed. Reference is a *social* matter: it is a social convention that brings the name to its bearer, a convention that began with some sort of baptism or dubbing.15 The utterance itself may suggest which convention we are relying on. If one says “Campbell is a gorgeous model”, the utterance itself

13. The same story applies to ambiguous words as well: two or more distinct terms can look and sound alike (e.g.: ‘bank’, ‘mistress’, . . .). On the other hand, it may also be that the very same name or term will look and sound differently as it is the case of proper names which undergo translation (e.g.: ‘London’, ‘Londra’ and ‘Londres’) or terms spelled differently and/or pronounced differently within various dialects (e.g.: ‘behavior’ and ‘behaviour’, ‘amazing’ and ‘amasing’, ‘color’ and ‘colour’, . . .).

14. Generic names help us to understand the predicative use of proper names: e.g. “There are lots of Johns in my class”, “A Mary Smith was looking for you”, . . .

15. Notice that I am not arguing that the only way a name can come into existence is via a baptism. A proper name may be introduced in many different ways. Other times a description can be elected as a proper name (e.g.: ‘The Holy Roman Empire’, ‘The Red Devils’, ‘The Beatles’, ‘The Gunners’, etc.). I discussed this phenomenon in Corazza (2002a).
suggests that the utterer uses the name of Naomi Campbell and not the name of, say Sol Campbell or Kevin Campbell, the football players. The context of the utterance (i.e., the agent, time and place) does not affect, though, the use of the name; it does not help in fixing the reference. There is simply no need to fix the reference. Once a name enters the physical realm it cannot easily be dismissed. Sure, a proper name can die out; just as a secular tree can vanish. It is possible, though, at least in principle, to track that name as it is possible to track the existence of a secular tree. Think, for instance, of the many nazi war criminals that, with the help of some anti-Communist movements and the Vatican, changed their names and found refuge around the American continent. Most of them, sooner or later, were discovered nonetheless and their original name (the one they tried to hide) became current currency again.16

A rather similar story can be told about names, such as ‘Madagascar’ for instance, that switched reference. As the story goes, Marco Polo, in picking up the name ‘Madagascar’ from the natives, thought that it referred to the island while the natives used it to refer to the mainland. My analysis goes like this. The mistake, i.e. the switch of reference, occurred when Polo incorporated the name within his own language (Italian) and transmitted it to the other members of his linguistic community. In incorporating the name into his own linguistic practice Polo associated the name with the island. He somewhat re-baptized the island: he entertained the thought this (island) is Madagascar or this island is called ‘Madagascar’. The practice of using ‘Madagascar’ as the name for the island took over the native practice of using ‘Madagascar’ to refer to the mainland. Actually, what happened is that Polo, unbeknownst to him, created a new name. This

16. An historical note. The change of name and personality of major war criminals has been a common practice after the second world war: “One aspect of suppressing the anti-fascist resistance was the recruitment of war criminals like Klaus Barbie [the butcher of Lyon], an SS officer who had been the Gestapo chief of Lyon, France. . . . Although he was responsible for many hideous crimes, the US Army put him in charge of spying on the French. When Barbie was finally brought back to France in 1982 to be tried as a war criminal his use as agent was explained by Colonel (ret.) Eugene Kolb of the US Army counterintelligence Corps: Barbie’s ‘skills were badly needed. . . . His activities had been directed against the underground French Communist party and the resistance’, who were now targeted for repression by the American liberators. . . . Later on when it became difficult or impossible to protect these useful folks in Europe, many of them (including Barbie) were spirited of to the United States or to Latin America, often with the help of the Vatican and fascist priests.” (Chomsky; 1992: 18)
is similar to what may happen in translation. I have been told that ‘lama’ was introduced into Spanish by some conquistadors whom, inquiring about the name of a lama asked the native: “¿Cómo se llama?” The native, puzzled and unable to understand the question simply repeated ‘lama’. The conquistadors, believing that ‘lama’ was the name the native used for the lama, introduce it into their linguistic practice. Once again a new name has been created. This can happen in different ways: one can create a new name from scratch, one can create a new name in translation from an unknown language (e.g.: Quine’s ‘gavagai’ example), etc. The ‘Madagascar’ and ‘lama’ cases fall into the last category. In these cases there are interpretations and/or translations going on. To claim, though, that an interpretation and/or translation happens each time one uses or hears a name amounts to a misunderstanding of our general, consumerist, practice of using and transmitting names.17

The way context affects the use of a proper name mirrors the way it influences the use of ambiguous expressions. Before using ‘bank’, for instance, we have to decide whether we use it exploiting the convention which brings us near the river or to the financial institution.18 The contextual features we appeal to in these situations are better understood as helping us decide which particular term/name is used rather than determining which referent is picked out.

17. My story can thus accommodate Mercier’s worries and criticisms of the consumerist picture: “But the appeal to the social character of language will not explain how Polo’s speaker-referent (or anyone else’s) becomes the semantic-referent. The social character of language could possibly play a part in such an explanation only if there existed at some point a social language in which the semantic-referent of ‘Madagascar’ were Madagascar-the-island... To begin to explain how Polo’s speaker-referent can become his semantic-referent, I claim, we have to look at individualistic aspects of Polo’s interaction with the word ‘Madagascar’ as it gets transmitted to him.” (Mercier; 1999: 104)

18. I am not suggesting, however, that proper names are ambiguous. For a discussion on how proper names differ from ambiguous expression see Napoli (1997). Proper names, unlike ambiguous expressions or synonymous expressions, do not usually occur in dictionaries. So one can argue that a speaker who does not know that ‘bank’ is ambiguous, like one who does not know that ‘unmarried man’ and ‘bachelor’ are synonymous, is not fully competent with English. On the other hand, we cannot say that one who does not know the meanings of the thousand of ‘Jane Black’, i.e., all the individuals who happen to share the same generic name, is linguistically incompetent. Notice that from the fact that from “NN is F” a competent speaker may be able to infer “Someone called ‘NN’ is F” or “The bearer of ‘NN’ is F”, we cannot say that our speaker must know the bearer of ‘NN’ to be competent with ‘NN’. In order to make this inference the speaker merely need to know is that ‘NN’ is a proper name.
by a single context-sensitive word. Take for example ‘bank’. The contextual features may help the audience to decide whether the speaker is using the term of the financial institution or whether she is using the (distinct though homophonic) term standing for the embankment. Hence, ‘bank’ is not a single term that, like an indexical, may pick out different referents in different contexts.

We can follow Perry and capture these intuitions in distinguishing between pre-semantic and semantic use of context:

Sometimes we use context to figure out with which meaning a word is being used, or which of several words that look or sound alike is being used, or even which language is being spoken. These are pre-semantic uses of context. In the case of indexicals, however, context is used semantically. It remains relevant after the language, words and meaning are all known; the meaning directs us to certain aspects of context. (Perry; 1997: 593)

If one (e.g. Burge; 1973) is inclined to think that proper names are disguised complex demonstratives, then one commits oneself to the thesis that the reference of a proper name, like the reference of a demonstrative, is fixed by the agent’s directing attention. One way to understand this proposal would be to argue that the latter singles out the convention that supposedly bridges the gap between the name type and its referent. I cannot see, though, how this can be possible. In particular, I cannot see how an agent can direct her attention to a given convention. Roughly, one can demonstrate/point toward/. . . an individual while one cannot point toward/demonstrate/. . . an individual who is not present, nor to a given convention.19 One exploits a convention. To be honest, though, Burge’s proposal is that a proper name works like a complex demonstrative. A proper name, ‘Aristotle’ for instance, expresses the property of being an Aristotle. Aristotle has this property insofar as he acquired the name ‘Aristotle’. The name qua complex demonstrative, ‘that Aristotle’, singles out a salient Aristotle. This is pretty much like an utterance of ‘that apple’ singling out the relevant apple. The problem I foresee can be summarized as follows. While ‘this apple’ may single out a relevant apple insofar as the referent is in the perceptual field

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19. For simplicity’s sake, I ignore cases when demonstrative expressions are used in a deferential way, such as ‘she’ in “She is not in today” (uttered whilst pointing to someone’s office door) or ‘it’ in “It must be a male” (uttered whilst indicating a bear’s footprint). In such cases, indexicals are used in another language game.
of the speaker and the audience, ‘that Aristotle’ cannot pick out the relevant Aristotle insofar as Aristotle is not present. As I suggested earlier indexicals, unlike proper names, are usually used to make reference in praesentia. Hence if ‘Aristotle’ goes proxy for ‘that Aristotle’ Aristotle should be present for the reference to succeed. If the referent is not present, the proper name qua complex demonstrative should select the relevant convention.²⁰

A word of clarification may be appropriate. I argued that a name standing for its bearer is a matter of convention and that the convention is the name. So, one exploiting the name-convention automatically refers to the bearer of the name. This way of speaking, though, suggests that there is a relation between the name and its bearer and, therefore, that the name can be dissociated from its bearer, i.e. that there is a gap between the name and its bearer. In that case one needs to tell a story of how the gap gets bridged. While Frege introduced senses, others ended up arguing that names are like indexicals and that it is the context in which the name is uttered that bridges the gap. This is not the picture I have in mind. If one likes to speak about a relation between a name and its bearer then I would claim that this relation is, to borrow Wittgenstein’s terminology, internal. That is, a relation which cannot fail to obtain inasmuch as it is constituted, by the terms it relates. In his later development Wittgenstein speaks of grammatical or logical relations suggesting that the relata are not connected by a relation of matching or fitting. So the name and its bearer do not stand in a relation of satisfaction and/or fitting as the Fregean picture and the indexical theory of names suggest.²¹ The name and its bearer are simply two aspects of the same convention. As two sides of the same coin cannot be dissociated, so the name cannot be dissociated from its bearer. The identity condition of the name depends on the bearer. In other words, if we take the name-bearer relation to be internal, then no intermediary condition can interfere between the relata. When one exploits the relevant convention, i.e. when one uses a

²⁰ If one (e.g. King; 2001) assumes that complex demonstratives are not singular terms but quantified noun phrases, then Burge’s proposal would become a version of the Russellian picture in which proper names are disguised definite descriptions. This position would then face the well known problems put forward by Kripke (1980) and Donnellan (1966). This is not, though, Burge’s aim.

²¹ “But this is a bad picture. It is as if one were to say ‘The king in chess is the piece that one can check’. But this can mean no more that in our language game of chess we only check the king.” (Wittgenstein; PI: § 136)
proper name, one manifests one’s competence simply in using the name in appropriate ways. One does not need to grasp senses, ideas, concepts, descriptions, or whatever in order to competently exploit the convention, i.e. use the name. This mirrors the case when one follows a given rule. One follows it blindly, i.e. without interpreting it. One knows exactly what to do and manifests that knowledge in acting in an appropriate way.

‘How am I able to obey a rule?’ – if this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my following the rule in the way I do.

If I have exhausted the justification I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do’. (Wittgenstein; \textit{PI} § 217)

When I obey a rule I do not choose. I obey the rule blindly. (Wittgenstein; \textit{PI} § 219)

The moral I would like to draw so far is that we seem to have strong reasons to resist the assimilation and/or reduction of proper names to indexicals. They are distinct tools of reference involving different competencies. When one uses an indexical one directs one’s attention toward a given object while when one uses a name one uses it with its fixed meaning and semantic value. For:

Words come to us prepackaged with a semantic value. If we are to use those words, the words we have received, the words of our linguistic community, then we must defer to their meaning. Otherwise we play the role of language creators. (Kaplan; 1989: 602)

Here Kaplan joins the Wittgensteinian picture I proposed above. Actually, proper names, like nouns, are cultural artifacts with a

22. The position I am here defending also bears similarities with Marcus insofar as she claims: “Proper names have fixed values in our language as a historical institution and are part of the public vocabulary. In this way they allow reference to an object despite the vicissitudes the objects undergo and despite the absence of direct acquaintance with many and perhaps most of the objects that the language user correctly names.” (Barcan Marcus; 1985/86: 204)

23. For the simplicity of argument I do not address the case of empty proper names. Are they proper names or, as Frege suggested, simply mock proper names? In other words, since one of the relata is missing the name \textit{qua} internal relation cannot exist. A way out of this problem would be to claim, following Donnellan (1974) that an empty name is still a relation with one of its relata corresponding with a block. An empty name could thus be viewed as a convention ending in a block.

24. “If you do not want to produce confusion you will do best not to call these words [‘this’ and ‘that’] names at all. – Yet, strange to say, the word ‘this’ has been called the only genuine name; so that anything else we call a name was one only in an inexact, approximate sense.” (Wittgenstein; \textit{PI} § 38)
genealogical history. ‘Bank’, as the noun for the riverside, derives from the old German ‘banke’ which is related to what in English we call ‘bench’, while ‘bank’ qua noun for the financial institution derives from the Latin words ‘bancus’ and ‘banca’. We thus have two homophonic names with very different histories. Names cannot be dissociated from their history. We cannot, though, tell the same story with indexicals: ‘today’ uttered today and ‘today’ uttered yesterday are not two distinct homophonic words with different histories. If this were the case we could use ‘today’ to refer to a previously fixed day. But, as Frege told us:

If someone wants to say the same today as he expressed yesterday using ‘today’, he must replace this word with ‘yesterday’. (Frege; 1918: 40)

So far I argued that the difference between an indexical and a proper name rests on the fact that in the first case we need context to determine the referent, while in the second we need context to determine which name is being used.25 Once again, the same point can be made in a slightly different way in exploiting Kaplan’s notion of consumerist semantics:

In our culture the role of language creators is largely reserved to parents, scientists, and headline writers for Variety; it is by no means the typical use of language as the subjectivist semanticist believes. To use language as language, to express something, requires an intentional act. But the intention that is required involves the typical consumer’s attitude of compliance, not the producer’s assertiveness. (Kaplan; 1989: 602)

As I said, when one uses a proper name one is exploiting and relying on an already existing convention while when one is using an indexical one is creating, by this very use, the link between the linguistic expression and the referent. This link is created by the very utterance or speech act. It is for these reasons that proper names, like other nouns, but unlike indexicals, can be used in a deferential way. As Kripke and Putnam told us, one can competently use ‘Gellman’ and ‘Feynman’ without knowing who Gellman and Feynman are – without even knowing that they are famous scientists – as one can use ‘elm’ and ‘beech’ without being able to distinguish an elm from

25. As Perry aptly points out: “The conventions of English do not associate particular individuals with the words ‘I’ and ‘you’, but conditions that individuals must satisfy to be the designata of uses of those words.” (Perry; 1997a: 346)

© Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2004
a beech.\textsuperscript{26} On the other hand, it does not make sense to claim that one can competently use an indexical, say ‘I’ or ‘she’, in a deferential way, i.e., without being able to tell apart oneself from, say, the female one directs one’s attention toward. In simply uttering ‘I’ one picks out oneself as referent and the I-thought expressed is cognitively grounded to oneself. Someone’s use of the first person pronoun does not rest on some principles of differentiation selecting oneself from others. Indexicals by their very nature put us en rapport with their referent, i.e., our thoughts get (automatically, cognitively) anchored to reality. As the scenario that I discussed at the beginning shows, the information we associate with indexical-thoughts is anchored to reality.\textsuperscript{27} We can, once again, capture the relevant difference in terms of different competencies involved. Actually, if one argues that proper names reduce to indexicals one commits oneself to a rather implausible theory of reference, i.e. that the user is responsible for bridging the gap between the name and its bearer:

This is connected with a conception of naming as, so to speak, an occult process. Naming appears as a queer connection of a word with an object. – And you really get such a queer connection when the philosopher tries to bring out the relation between name and thing by staring at an object in front of him and repeating the name or even the word ‘this’ innumerable times. For philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday. And here we may indeed fancy naming to be some remarkable act of mind, as it were a baptism of an object. And we can also say the word ‘this’ to the object, as it were address the object as ‘this’ – a queer use of this word, which doubtless only occurs in doing philosophy. (Wittgenstein; \textit{PI}: § 38)

I suspect that one of the motivations lying behind the reduction of proper names to indexicals is Fregean in spirit. Actually, if one is looking for something which bridges this alleged gap, a natural place to search would be the representations associated with the linguistic expressions. Following this picture an expression is used successfully

\footnotesize{26. “On my view, acquisition of a name does not, in general, put us \textit{en rapport} (in the language of “Quantifying in”) with the referent. But this is not required for us to use the name in the standard way as a device of direct reference”. (Kaplan; 1989: 605)

27. “On my view, our connection with a linguistic community in which names and other meaning-bearing elements are passed down to us enables us to entertain thoughts \textit{through the language} that would not otherwise be accessible to us. Call this the \textit{Instrumental Thesis}.” (Kaplan; 1989: 603)
if the speaker and hearer grasp the relevant representation associated with the expression. This picture is, if not in the letter, at least in the spirit, Cartesian:

There is for Frege a realm of intrinsically significant representations, distinct from the things represented and accessible to (even if not resident of) the mind, and linguistic expressions come alive by association with these representations. It is the Fregean senses, not their linguistic embodiments, Frege tells us, that refer in the primary instance. (Wettstein; 1998: 432)

The Fregean picture ultimately rests, to borrow Wettstein’s happy expression, on the cognitive fix requirement. In order to think and talk about a given item one must be in a substantial cognitive relation with the latter. One ultimately needs to possess a discriminative cognitive fix on the referent. It is because of the search of the cognitive fix that Russell at some point argued that the only genuine proper names are ‘this’ and ‘that’ insofar as they put us in direct contact with reality. Following this trend some have been tempted to reduce, or at least explain, proper names in terms of indexicals.

28. To be sure Frege stresses that senses are not residents of the mind and postulates a third, objective, realm of senses. Frege (and the neo-Fregeans), though, maintains that an expression refers via the mediation of a sense and that the speaker’s and hearer’s understanding of and competence with the relevant expression depends on the grasping of the expression’s sense. As Dummett puts it: “The extrusion of thoughts from the mind initiated by Bolzano led to what is often termed ‘Platonism’, as exemplified by Frege’s mythology of the ‘third realm’: for, if thoughts are not contents of the mind, they must be located in a compartment of reality distinct both from physical world and the inner world of private experience. This mythology served Frege and Husserl as a bulwark against the psychologism which they opposed. If, now, our capacity for thought is equated with, or at least explained in terms of, our ability to use language, no such bulwark is required: for language is a social phenomenon, in no way private to the individual, and its use is publicly observable. It is for this reason that the linguistic turn may be seen as a device for continuing to treat thoughts as objective and utterly disparate from inner mental events, without having recourse to the platonistic mythology.” (Dummett; 1993: 131)

29. Evans’ appeal to what he terms ‘Russell Principle’ in explaining the use and understanding of singular terms (e.g. proper names) is symptomatic of this tendency. Frege’s senses are supposed to play the very same role, i.e. to be what puts us in contact with the world of referents. So Evans claims: “I think it will be universally acknowledged that understanding a use of a proper name requires one to go beyond the thought that the speaker is referring to some person known as NN, and to arrive at a thought in the thinking of which one actually thinks of the object in question. The reason for this is not the one that is usually given, namely that the property of being known as NN is semantical in character, but rather, a consideration of the same sort as I brought to bear in the case of, say, ‘you’. One does not understand a remark of the form ‘You are F’, addressed to oneself, just by knowing that the speaker is saying that the person he is addressing is F; one must go beyond the referential
For the latter do indeed put us in a direct relation with the object we refer to. It is part of our linguistic practice that we usually use indexicals to pick out objects in our surrounding. It is for this reason that Sue asks about that man, the man she perceives and is interested in. In other words, it is because indexicals, unlike proper names and other terms, are intrinsically perspectival, i.e., they are tied to an agent’s (egocentric) setting that they put us in “direct contact” with the referent. The understanding of an indexical requires the grasp of the context in which it is uttered. One does not understand a use of ‘I’, for instance, if one does not grasp the contextual parameter, in that case, the agent. On the other hand, one can understand a proper name, say ‘Plato’, even if one does not know when or by whom it has been uttered and/or written. If one reads a piece of graffiti saying “Plato is a Greek philosopher” one may understand what is said even if one does not know when it has been produced or by whom, while if one reads a piece of graffiti stating “I was here yesterday” one does not understand what is said inasmuch as one does not grasp the contextual parameters. Indexical identification, unlike identification using proper names, is perspectival. Without a perspectival identification indexicals are silent.  

In the scenario I described at the beginning, it is because Jane starts from a publicly identified individual, Kaplan, that she asks (1)[Do you know which person David Kaplan is?]. On the other hand, it is because Sue starts from a perspectival identification that she asks (3)[Do you know who that man is?]. While Sue’s thought about Kaplan is cognitively grounded to Kaplan (she perceives him and refers to him with ‘that man’), Jane’s thought about Kaplan is deferential (she relies on Jon to individuate Kaplan). Once again, this remark is inspired by Wittgenstein:

Our difficulty could be put this way: We think about things, – but how do these things enter into our thoughts? We think about Mr. Smith; but Mr. Smith need not be present. A picture of him won’t do; for how are we to know whom it represents? In fact no sub-

30. “In perspectival identification, we use an agent’s first-hand cognitive relations to persons, objects, places, etc. as the identificatory framework.” (Hintikka; 1998: 205)
stitute for him will do. Then how can he himself be an object of our thoughts? . . .

We said the connection between our thinking, or speaking, about a man and the man himself was made when, in order to explain the meaning of the word ‘Mr. Smith’ we pointed to him, saying “this is Mr. Smith”. And there is nothing mysterious about this connection. I mean, there is no queer mental act which somehow conjures up Mr. Smith in our minds when he really isn’t here. What makes it difficult to see that this is the connection is a peculiar form of expression of ordinary language, which makes it appear that the connection between our thought (or the expression of our thought) and the thing we think about must have subsisted during the act of thinking. . . .

Someone says, “Mr. N. will come to see me this afternoon”; I ask “Do you mean him?” pointing to someone present, and he answers ‘Yes’. In this conversation a connection was established between the word ‘Mr. N.’ and Mr. N. But we are tempted to think that while my friend said, “Mr. N. will come to see me”, and meant what he said, his mind must have made the connection. . . .

This is partly what makes us think of meaning or thinking as a peculiar mental activity; the word ‘mental’ indicating that we mustn’t expect to understand how these things work.

What we said of thinking can also be applied to imagining. Someone says he imagines King’s College on fire. We ask him: “How do you know that it’s King’s College you imagine on fire?”. Couldn’t it be a different building, very much like it? In fact is your imagination so absolutely exact that there might not be a dozen buildings whose representation your imagination could be?” – And still you say: “There is no doubt I imagined King’s College and no other building”. But can saying this be making the very connection we want? For saying it is like writing the words “Portrait of Mr. So-and-so” under a picture. . . .

The fault which in all our reasoning about these matters we are inclined to make is to think that images and experiences of all sorts, which are in some sense closely connected with each other, must be present in our mind at the same time. (Wittgenstein; BB: 38–9)

In a similar spirit Kaplan claims:

Contrary to Russell, I think we succeed in thinking about things in the world not only through the mental residues of that which we ourselves experience, but also vicariously, through the symbolic resources that comes to us through our language. It is the latter – vocabulary power – that gives us our apprehensive advantage over the nonlinguistic animals. My dog, being color-blind, cannot entertain the thought that I am wearing a red shirt. But my color-
blind colleague can entertain even the thought that Aristotle wore a red shirt. (Kaplan; 1989: 604)

So far the general moral seems to be that proper names and indexicals are distinct tools enabling us to pick up objects of discourse and to think about them. Their semantic difference parallels the different competencies involved in using them.

For these reasons, if proper names have a linguistic meaning, the latter cannot be represented as a function taking as its argument the context of utterance and giving as its value the referent. To put it slightly differently, if proper names have linguistic meaning, the latter does not work like the meaning of an indexical insofar as if names had a character represented by a function, the latter would yield, in every context, the same value. That is to say, the character of a proper name, if any, would not be context-sensitive, i.e. it would not take as its argument the context of utterance and change value with a change in that context. For the reason I gave above when I assimilated proper names to conventions and argued that if we use the name-bearer relation to explain the relevant convention the relation should be an internal relation, I believe that the Kaplanian notion of character is an unhappy notion to appeal to when discussing proper names. I would thus suggest that only indexicals have characters.31

What I just said is not, though, a knock down argument against the indexical view of proper names.32 For, the friends of the indexical view of proper names can argue that an extended notion of context of utterance would furnish a context-dependent semantics for proper names. In that case the context of utterance does not merely contain as parameters the agent, the time and place of the utterance. It also contains what Pelczar & Reinsbury (1998) call “the dubbing-in-force” or what Voltolini (1995) calls the “context of acquisition.”33 In that case the character of a proper name is a func-

31. For a recent discussion of why the character of a name cannot be represented by a description such as “the bearer of ‘N’”, see Predelli (2001).
32. To be honest, I do not believe that there are knock down arguments on this issue. Ultimately, whether the indexical theory of proper names should be preferred to the picture I am proposing rests on economical and esthetical reasons. I do believe, though, that the picture I propose is more intuitive and economical than the indexical theory of proper names. But this is not for me to judge.
33. “The indexicals ‘I’, ‘here’, ‘now’ and ‘Madagascar’ can be distinguished from one another by the contextual factors to which they are sensitive. ‘I’ is sensitive to the ‘utterer’-feature of a context of utterance, ‘here’ and ‘now’ to a context’s place and time, and ‘Madagascar’ to the dubbing-in-force of a context.” (Pelczar & Rainsbury; 1998: 298)
tion from the context of acquisition or from the dubbing-in-force to the referent. Following this suggestion the context of utterance acquires new parameters. This way a given name type can acquire different values in different contexts of utterance. The introduction of new contextual parameters such as the dubbing-in-force or the context of acquisition, seems to be, at least to me, an *ad hoc* move proposed in order to accommodate proper names along with indexicals. As I shall show in the next section, a more plausible picture distinguishes between the context of utterance (in a narrow sense) and a broad notion of context in which during a linguistic interchange and a speech act all relevant features may appear and may be invoked in order to guarantee and explain the success of the communication. As I shall argue, following Perry and Kaplan, the former is semantical in nature while the latter is pre-semantical or meta-semantical.

Along this line we can quote another feature pointing in the direction of a difference between proper names and indexicals is that the latter, unlike the former, do not occur as rules in dictionaries. Actually, there is a *rule* each competent speaker applies when using the first person pronoun. If one looks in the dictionary one can read that ‘I’ is “a pronoun used by the speaker or writer referring to him or herself”. This is all one needs to know. Sure, to be a competent speaker one does not need to be able to spell out the rule in the same way that the dictionary or the semanticist does. As Wittgenstein would say, one manifests one’s competence with the rule in following it. In our particular case one manifests one’s competence with the relevant rule in using ‘I’ in an appropriate way:

The grammar of the word ‘know’ is evidently closely related to that of ‘can’, ‘is able to’. But also closely related to that of ‘understands’. (‘Mastery’ of a technique) (*PI*: § 150)

Try not to think of understanding as a ‘mental process’ at all. – *For that* is the expression which confuses you. But ask yourself: in what sort of case, in what kind of circumstances, do we say, ‘Now I know how to go on’, when, that is, the formula *has* occurred to me? – (*PI*: § 155)

The rule, or character (which, as we saw, can be represented by a function from context to content or referent), is not more mysterious than the other rules we follow in our every day linguistic practice. When using ‘I’ we all follow and apply the same rule. On the other hand, we do not usually find proper names in the dictionary...
as we find them in the telephone books. A person has to be rather famous to get her name into the dictionary. The same for a place: it has to be rather famous to get the same honor. Besides, if we get lucky and find a proper name, say ‘Rome’, as an entry in the dictionary we do not read that ‘Rome’ means the same as “the place called ‘Rome’”, we rather find some information such as that Rome is the capital of Italy, the city where the Pope resides, etc. So, one can argue that a speaker who does not know that ‘I’ is a pronoun referring to the speaker or writer (i.e. one who does not master its character), as one who does not know that vixens are female foxes and bachelors unmarried men, is not fully competent with English. On the other hand, we cannot say that one who does not know the meanings of the thousands who happen to share the same generic name, ‘Mary Smith’ for instance, is linguistically incompetent. It is instructive to mention that one of the reasons proposed in favor of excluding proper names from dictionaries is that proper names are used as pure labels, “only for the distinction of one person from another”. Did the lexicographers who decided to exclude proper names from the dictionary because they merely function as labels anticipate one of the main, if not the chief, lesson of direct reference? For I take proper names qua tags to be the paradigm of direct reference.

Besides, if we pause to think of how we come to learn the use of a proper name and the use of an indexical we gain further evidence in favor of the thesis that they are distinct tools, distinct instruments, in our language. Actually one can come to learn a proper name, say ‘Jane’ by being told “She/this woman/. . . is Jane” while one does not come to learn the use of ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘she’, ‘today’ and the like by being told “This is I”, “This is today”, etc. In learning how to use indexicals and proper names one comes to learn how to manipulate distinct tools of reference; one comes to master different

34. See T. Dyche and W. Pardon preface of their 1735 dictionary A New General English Dictionary. See also J. Serranus who in, 1539 (Dictionarium Latinogermanicum), claimed that proper names have been left out “as they stand in no need of interpretation”. Quoted by Marconi (1990: 81).

35. I can but agree with Barcan Marcus when she writes: “A feature of genuine directly referring names, in contrast to many descriptions, is that the values of such names remain fixed . . . When proper names and such essential descriptions were conflated in a category of rigid designators, a crucial distinction was obscured. Object must be there to be named. Descriptions are prescriptions for finding an object. The relation between a name and its referent and between a description and its satisfier are different.” (Barcan Marcus; 1985/6: 212)
techniques of reference. When one correctly uses these different tools one manifests different competencies. While on the one hand one exploits a pre-existing convention, on the other hand one applies a given rule to fix the reference. That is, while in the former case one defers to the linguistic community to fix the meaning of the words one uses (names comes to us prepackaged with their semantic value), in the latter case one creates the link between the word (indexical) and the referent. Indexicals and proper names are very different tools with very different purposes. To underrate this difference amounts to underestimating the linguistic richness and varieties of natural language:

One has been tempted to say that ‘now’ is the name of an instance of time, and this of course, would be like saying that ‘here’ is the name of a place, ‘this’ the name of a thing, and ‘I’ the name of a man. . . . But nothing is more unlike than the use of the word ‘this’ and the use of a proper name – I mean the games played with these words, not the phrase in which they are used. For we do say ‘This is short’ and ‘Jack is short’; but remember that “This is short” without the pointing gesture and without the thing we are pointing to would be meaningless. – What can be compared with a name is not the word ‘this’ but, if you like, the symbol consisting of this word, the gesture, and the sample. We might say: Nothing is more characteristic of a proper name A than we can use it in such a phrase as “This is A”; and it makes no sense to say “This is this” or “Now is now” or “Here is here”. (Wittgenstein; BB: 108–9)

This distinction between proper names and indexicals ultimately rests on the different way in which the use of proper names and indexicals exploits context. I now turn to the discussion of the different ways in which context enters my picture.

3. Types of Context

To deal with the complexity of how context affects our linguistic interchanges I distinguish between the setting, narrow context and broad context. The following chart should summarize these distinctions:

36. As Barcan Marcus aptly points out: “Proper names have fixed values in our language as a historical institution and are part of the public vocabulary. In this way they allow reference to an object despite the vicissitudes the objects undergo and despite the absence of direct acquaintance with many and perhaps most of the objects that the language user correctly names.” (Barcan Marcus; 1985/6: 204)
As I understand it, the setting is the scene or scenario underlying a linguistic interchange. As such it is the *sine qua non* of each speech act and can be viewed as the background on which a linguistic episode takes place. Think, for instance, of the differences involved when we speak to acquaintances and when we speak with foreigners. In the former case much more information can be presupposed. If you and I happen to know and interact with only one John Smith, we do not have to specify which particular name we are using. If the members of a given family or community happen to have no philosophical knowledge at all, when they use ‘Aristotle’ they do not have to stress that they use the name of the magnate. If someone joins our discussion she may be puzzled and may ask us whether we are speaking about the philosopher or the magnate. If members of a given linguistic community never travel, they never have to specify the time zone when they state the time.

The notion of setting, as I conceive it, is inspired by Wittgenstein. As such it bears some resemblance to Wittgenstein’s notions of form of life and language-games. Like any game, a language-game presupposes a setting. The latter is the background upon which a language-game rests. If a given setting undergoes considerable changes

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37. Actually, Wittgenstein claims that to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life (*PL*: § 7, § 19) and that to imagine a language means to imagine a culture (*BB*: 134). “We could easily imagine a language (and that means again a culture) in which there existed no common expression for light blue and dark blue, in which the former, say, was called ‘Cambridge’, the latter ‘Oxford’. If you ask a man of this tribe what Cambridge and Oxford have in common, he’d be inclined to say ‘Nothing’.” (*BB*: 134–5) Forms of life thus provide the foundation of language, they are the cultural activities on which language-games are embedded.
the game would not be played or it would become a different game. There are thus elements of the setting which, even if they are not primarily or directly involved in the explanation of the meaning of some expressions, are nonetheless relevant for their meaning; they are the condition upon which expressions came to possess the meaning that they actually posses. For:

Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing. (Wittgenstein; PI: § 25)

To stress the relevance of the notion of setting in the overall explanation of a given linguistic activity, I invite you to think of the way we use recording devices such as answering machines or post-its. One cannot successfully use and/or understand a recorded message on an answering machine or on a post-it stating “I’m not in, leave a message” if one is not familiar with the way these tools are used in everyday life, i.e. with the language-game involved when these devices are at work. Post-its, for instance, are conceived, among other things, as gadgets enabling one to leave messages. So if one reads a post it on someone’s office door stating “I’m not in today” one takes it to mean that the occupier of the office is not in his/her office the day the message is read. If the post-it ends in the dustbin, one does not take it to mean that the agent is not in the dustbin on the relevant day. This rests on the general practice of using post-its, i.e., it rests on patterns of the communal activities of using them. A similar story can be told about the way we use and manipulate other communication-conceived devices. Moreover, the same story can also be told when people engage in a communicative exchange. If, chatting to a colleague, one says “Let’s meet at 3:15pm, on April 12, 2001” one is likely to refer to 3:15pm relative to the time zone in which the conversation takes place, while if someone from London is talking on the phone to someone in Rome, further information is required to see whether the 3:15pm stands for 3:15pm CET or 3:15pm GMT. A change of setting may involve a change in the language-game and, thus, a change in what is said. Homophonic words and/or sentences can be used to express very different things in different settings. To put it in a nutshell, the setting enables us to determine which are the relevant aspects that concur in fixing what is said by a given utterance. As such it also helps in fixing the meaning of the words used or, more precisely, in determining which words are
used. As I have already claimed, it is the setting which helps determining whether one is using ‘Aristotle’, the name of the philosopher, or ‘Aristotle’, the name of the magnate. Similarly, whether one is using ‘mistress’, the name for the governess, ‘mistress’ the name for the teacher, ‘mistress’ the name for the female head of the household, ‘mistress’ the name for the lover, . . . If one is puzzled, i.e., if in a given setting one does not know which name is in play one can simply ask. It is as simple as that. In short, the setting qua presupposition of the existence of a (language) game, is the sine qua non upon which an activity, linguistic or not, rests.

The notion of narrow context, on the other hand, is what we need to understand indexical expressions: it furnishes the relevant contextual parameters that help fix the reference. In order to deal with the distinction between pure indexicals and demonstratives, though, we have to recognize two subcategories of narrow context: (i) the context created/exploited by the utterance, i.e. the agent, time and place and (ii) the featured created by the speech act such as pointing gestures, glimpses, etc.

On the other hand, the features which pertain to the setting, such as speaking English, being a member of a given community, attending such and such a party, being dressed in such and such a way, etc. are not part of what one says and usually aims to communicate. The fact that one speaks German when one says ‘Ich’ is not what one says. Our German speaker merely refers to herself using the first person pronoun ‘Ich’: if she were to speak English she would have used ‘I’, for if she had uttered ‘Ich’ she would probably have expressed disgust.\footnote{This example comes from Perry (1997).}

Finally, the notion of broad context should capture the fact that the understanding of a given expression and utterance often rests on the setting upon which it is produced. The audience often needs to appeal to features of the setting to understand a given expression. The way the speaker is dressed, for instance, may help the audience to infer whether she is using ‘bank’ as the name for the financial institution or not. – One does not need, though, to dress as a fisherman to use ‘bank’ as the name for the embankment.

A couple of examples may help to elucidate and reinforce the distinction between narrow and broad context. When indexicals are at work, reference is fixed by the utterance produced. If one reads

\footnote{This example comes from Perry (1997).}
the token “I’m not in now, but I’ll be back soon” on someone’s office door or hears the token “I am not in now, please leave a message after the tone” recorded on someone’s answering machine, the reference of ‘I’ and ‘now’ is fixed the very moment one reads/hears the token, i.e., by the utterances produced by these tokens. One can read/hear the very same token at different times and/or places. In that case different utterances would be produced and different references fixed. In the case of proper names, though, we do not have to rely on the utterance for reference to be fixed. If one reads “Tony Blair is not in London on May 25 2002” one may understand this very message without relying on the utterance. The time and place one reads this note is irrelevant in fixing the reference, i.e., the utterance produced by the reading of the note does not affect who/what the referents are. For these very reasons proper names do not exploit context in the same way indexical expressions do. Context, if relevant in understanding the use of a proper name, is not the context of utterance or narrow context, it is a broad notion of context.

These different notions of context nicely fall into Kaplan’s semantics-metasemantics taxonomy – and, as we saw, into Perry pre-semantic semantic use of context –:

The fact that a word or phrase has a certain meaning clearly belongs to semantics. On the other hand, a claim about the basis for ascribing a certain meaning to a word or phrase does not belongs to semantics. “Ohsnay” means snow in Pig-Latin. That’s a semantic fact about Pig-Latin. The reason why “ohsnay” means snow is not a semantic fact; it is some kind of historical or sociological fact about Pig-Latin. Perhaps because it relates to how language is used, it should be categorized as part of the pragmatics of Pig-Latin (thought I am not really comfortable with this nomenclature), or perhaps, because it is a fact about semantics, as part of the Metasemantics of Pig-Latin (or perhaps, for those who prefer working from below to working from above, as part of the Foundations of semantics of Pig-Latin). . . . For present purposes let us settle on metasemantics. (Kaplan; 1989: 573–4)

The notion of narrow context clearly belongs to semantics, while the notion of broad context to metasemantics. The fact that Aristotle came to bear ‘Aristotle’ is a historical fact that, as such, belongs to metasemantics while the fact that ‘I’ refers to the agent of the context is a semantic fact. The rationale why ‘Aristotle’ names Aristotle is not reported in the dictionary while the fact that ‘I’ refers
to the writer or speaker (the agent) is reported is symptomatic of
the semantics-metasemantics distinction and, as I have been arguing,
of the fact that they are different linguistic tools.

As for the pragmatics-semantics divide we can follow the Gricean
tradition and argue that pragmatic processes take as input what is
said (Kaplanian contents and/or propositions) and gives as output
implicated propositions. In other words, the picture I proposed fits the
view that a sentence in a given context (or an utterance if you prefer)
first expresses a given proposition (or propositions) – the semantic
process – then may implicate other propositions and/or information
– the pragmatic process. The implicature process, as I view it, goes
from the semantic propositions to the pragmatically imparted propo-
sitions, i.e., it takes as input the former and gives as output the latter.
This does not precludes, though, that pragmatic mechanisms concur
in the expression of semantic proposition.

4. Conclusion

I argued against the reduction of proper names to indexicals, claim-
ing that they are different tools of reference involving different com-
petencies. Among the main differences the following deserves special
attention. While indexical identification is perspectival, identification
by proper names is public. In particular, the information one attaches
to one use and/or understanding of an indexical expression is cog-
nitively anchored to reality while the information one attaches to a
proper name may not, and need not, be so anchored. As a conse-
quence identity sentences like:

(5) Tully is Cicero

and

(6) This is Tully

play different roles in our cognitive architecture. While (5) may
convey the information that there are two distinct naming conven-
tions for a single individual – roughly that a single man carries two
names –, (6) conveys the information that the demonstrated individ-
ual is named ‘Tully’, i.e. that the demonstrated individual and the
‘Tully’-convention converge. When one comes to accept as true (5)
one, as Frege claims, expands one’s knowledge. When one accepts as
true (6) one also expands one’s knowledge. The expansion of the knowledge is, though, different. In the former case one comes to be aware that the information one associated to the name ‘Tully’ can also be associated to the name ‘Cicero’ and *vice versa*. In the latter case, one comes to entertain anchored information. That is to say, one is now able to anchor the information one associates with the name ‘Tully’ to a specific individual one is able to single out in an indexical way. One comes to entertain a perspectival thought. Actually, the aim of uttering (6), like an utterance of (2) in the scenario I described at the beginning, is to allow someone to anchor her information to reality. To put it in a nutshell, in one case one comes to relate two sets of information associated to two distinct conventions, while in the other case one comes to relate one set of information to an individual one is cognitively related to; an individual to whom one entertains a perspectival identification. In the latter case, unlike the former, the referent is in the cognitive field of the thinker.

References


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