18 Tracking Perspectives: Reply to Higginbotham

Jim Higginbotham's elegant and interesting essay deals with some fundamental problems in the philosophy of language, attractively disguised through the medium of low-key technical issues. I am sympathetic with most of what he says. My comments will mainly probe basic terminology and implications for understanding the relation between language, meaning, and thought.

Higginbotham's initial "impressionistic" terminology makes me uneasy. The problem is said to be that if we preserve reference of demonstratives or indexicals, we "lose" or "fail to preserve" the perspective of others' utterances reported in indirect discourse. Late in the essay he claims that we can "convey" but not "express" the perspective of others in indirect speech. But he does not explicate these terms. What he is invoking with this language is the fact that the reporter just cannot pick out the referent that the initial speaker intended by referentially using the same indexicals that the original speaker did—or indexicals with the same standing meaning or character. And in some cases, understanding the perspective of the speaker requires mastery of contextual matters that goes beyond anything codified in the language. But it is part of Higginbotham's persuasive point that we are often able to understand and even articulate through our use of language *some important aspects* of the perspective that the original speaker had on the referents. As Higginbotham adds, understanding such things is part of standing linguistic competence. In that sense the perspectives seem not to get lost. They are preserved, at least marked, through the reporter's report. Moreover, insofar as the reporting language enables one to keep track of and think, ascriptively, the content of the original speaker's thoughts—as I will argue that it can in some cases—it might be said, in a so far nontechnical sense, to "express" the original perspective. It might be said to do so even if it cannot "take up" and use that original perspective.

Some of this is just terminology, involving no substantive disagreement. But the impressionistic terminology encourages ways of construing the applications of the notions of reference, truth-conditions, meanings, and rules of use that deserve scrutiny.

One issue that I would like to reflect on arises in connection with the normal form that Higginbotham proposes. I am glad to see that he has found some use for my old truth-conditional explications of demonstratives and indexicals. I would not be surprised if he understands the implications of the proposal better than I did. What I am presently interested in is the relation between the normal form for statements of truth-conditions, on one hand, and the notions of meaning and rules of use, on the other. It is certainly possible to state truth-conditions, as Higginbotham does, in a way that leaves out (on the right side of the biconditional) everything but the referent of the demonstrative or indexical. But it seems to me questionable whether such a statement of truth conditions will coincide with "meaning," on any normal or theoretically promising construal. For then 'she is a cat' and 'that is a cat' will have the same meaning, if 'she' and 'that' refer to the same thing. I am

aware that some philosophers would embrace this conclusion with enthusiasm. But I do not find it attractive. I do not think that the conclusion will hold up over time.

Of course, one can say that the two demonstratives have the same meaning and different "rules of use" (or perhaps better, "rules of contextual reference"). But I am doubtful about this idea. I certainly want to agree that the rule for contextual reference for 'I' (or 'she') does not have the same meaning as, is not synonymous with, 'I' (or 'she'). The rule is a metastatement about the word; the meaning is not. (This point is relevant to some passages in my reply to Donnellan.) Similarly, I agree that what Higginbotham illustrates as rules of use are not part of the truth-conditions of an utterance—at least insofar as truth-conditions are what are stated on the right sides of truth-theoretic biconditionals in "normal form." I might possibly be brought to agree that 'this' and 'that' have the same meaning—either generally, or in given instances where they have the same referent—but slightly different rules for contextual reference. But I see no plausibility in claiming that particular uses of 'that' and 'she', or 'I' and 'she' (given sameness of reference) have the same meaning (or no meaning at all)—regardless of what one says about rules of contextual reference.

This is to say that I am very doubtful about Higginbotham's recommendation that we "split *the lexicon* into items with meanings and items with rules of use." It seems to me that 'she' has both a meaning (the quasi-predicational aspect that requires application only to females would presumably be included) and a rule of use, or rule of contextual reference. (There seems to be an analogue of the referential-attributive distinction, in Donnellan's sense, even with indexicals like 'she'.) Thus, insofar as statements of truth-conditions are supposed to give statements of meaning, I would think it better not to leave everything out of the demonstrative but its referent. At least it would be better not to do so in cases like 'she' or present tense (and unlike 'this') where the demonstrative, apart from any particular use, places a requirement on the nature of the referent. This line is, of course, compatible with still associating bound variables, somehow restricted, with the demonstratives or indexicals in the truth-theoretic normal forms.

There are fine-grained issues here about whether elements of meaning include only requirements on the nature of the referent or subject matter, or also structural, perspectival requirements on the use-*occurrence* of the demonstrative or indexical. For example, with present tense (or 'now'), there is the requirement that the indexical concern *times*. That is a requirement on the nature of the subject matter that seems to be part of its meaning. Even if 'this' refers, on an occasion, to a time, it is not part of its meaning that it do so. With present tense (or 'now') there is also the perspectival requirement in most uses that the time be broadly contemporaneous with the *use-occurrence* of the indexical. I am inclined to think that both types of requirement go into "meaning." I am inclined to mean by 'meaning' what is noninferentially understood through the expression, apart from special context of use of the expression, by any competent speaker.

Perhaps one should agree that there is more to literal or standing meaning than what is stated as a truth-condition in normal form on the right side of the truth-theoretic biconditionals. Or perhaps one should associate with the bound variables on the right side more of the restrictions on reference or on perspective, which seem to be part of the meaning. If neither of these strategies is attractive to Higginbotham, then I would like a better understanding of his theoretical understanding of the notion of 'meaning'.

As I have noted, it seems to me that things go into the setting up conditions or into the rules of contextual reference that are not part of the meaning or truth-conditions. Such rules make reference to the utterance or to the speaker or to the relation of reference itself, whereas the meaning does not. But I think it mistaken to hold that no aspects of the rules of contextual reference for demonstratives or indexicals are part of their 'meaning'.

This issue spills over into the understanding of the 'content' of complement clauses in intensional propositional attitude contexts. It seems to me that these wonderings are different:

(1) Is that an adult female?

(2) Is she an adult female?

where the demonstratives in (1) and (2) refer to the same individual.

In reporting these wonderings in indirect discourse, we should be able to distinguish between the two. (2) is a wondering about developmental stage, but not about gender; (1) could be about either or both. So the complement clause in an indirect report of these wonderings, if it is to remain maximally faithful to the originals, needs to make the distinction. It seems to me that one *can* wash out the distinction in a report, but one should be able to avoid doing so. It is not clear to me how Higginbotham would respond to these points.

Higginbotham's discussion of Evans and Perry and transformations between coordinate systems seems to me persuasive. I do not see any basis for postulating Evans's *completing* senses. But I think that there are distinctions between rules of use (or rules of contextual reference), the indexicals' (or demonstratives') standing meanings, and conceptual perspectives backing demonstratives. The conceptual perspectives go beyond anything contained in conventional or standing word-meaning or in the rules of contextual reference. Each of these three elements plays a role in fixing or constituting the elements of coordinate systems. Although rules of contextual reference describe the way that people refer with indexicals, I am not convinced by Higginbotham's claim that one must *understand* them to understand the indexicals. Children may not have mastered the metaconcepts needed to understand the rules, but they could still use language in accord with them and count as understanding (comprehending) the terms in a nontheorerdical sense of 'understanding'.

The discussion of the puzzles of transformations also seems to be on the right track. The exposition here is masterly. The strategy that tracks perspective seems to me to have an advantage over the strategy that tracks only the possible worlds in which the speaker's perspective is true. Modally equivalent truth-conditions are likely to be too coarse-grained to capture all there is to perspectives. Contrary to Higginbotham's suggestion, I doubt whether we can in general construct a perspective out of the reference of an indexical (or especially a demonstrative) together with the relevant possible worlds. But these are technical issues to be worked out on their own.

Higginbotham seems to me right in claiming that sometimes the original perspective is lost but unneeded, and that (almost) always the perspective of the reporter is sufficiently different from that of the original speaker that the demonstratives and indexicals the reporter uses will not have the same standing meaning and will not, as used referentially, express the same perspective as that of the original speaker.

But as Higginbotham emphasizes, "Fregean elements" remain. Even in these cases, especially with demonstratives, there will always be cognitively relevant conceptual perspectives, modes of presentation, for both speaker and reporter that are associated with the demonstratives and that go beyond both their standing linguistic meaning and their rules of contextual reference. So in using a demonstrative 'this' on a particular occasion, one will associate perhaps a perceptual concept with the object purportedly demonstrated. Such conceptual perspectives *are* necessary for using demonstratives, but they are too variable with context and user to be part of the standing meaning of the demonstratives. Although they are not always "completing," in the sense that they do not always suffice of themselves to fix a referent (they too rely on nonconceptual relations, and singular applications, to fix their objects), they are richer than the standing linguistic meaning, or the rules of contextual reference. Although they are normally not "completing," they are otherwise very close to what Frege meant by the senses of context-dependent devices.[1]

Perhaps Higginbotham is right to balk at calling them "Fregean senses." But Frege certainly included more in sense than contemporary philosophers include in meaning. I think that this difference does not merely derive from errors in his theory. It derives from his conception of language as primarily a vehicle for the expression of thought. He was not much interested in the lowest common denominator understood among competent speakers—which is approximately what modern theories of linguistic meaning focus on. Frege could (and perhaps did) allow for perceptual as well as linguistic items to be thought components, which are unlike senses only in that they are not expressed in language. They play the same role in his theory of thought. I do not know what it would mean for a sense to "involve objects intrinsically." I think that some senses for Frege necessarily have referents. On the other hand, I do not think it reasonable to mix up typical referents of conceptual perspectives with the perspectives themselves; only the latter are intentional. The

objects of *de re* reference or attitudes are over and above the senses. Moreover, the contextual character of the association between demonstratives and conceptual perspectives is no bar to counting the latter senses. Frege was not primarily interested in conventional linguistic meaning. He was interested in the relation between language and thought. Where language expresses thought only contextually, rather than in a standing or conventional way, the thought can still be the sense of the language.

Let me return to Higginbotham's point that often the reporter does not lose track of the original speaker's perspective. What seems to me most interesting about his discussion is his claim that some aspects of our keeping track, in favorable circumstances, are part of our *linguistic* competence. The reporter's competence in using language to "convey" (to use Higginbotham's term) the meanings and even conceptual perspectives associated with the original speaker's demonstratives and indexicals suggests that a theory of language should look more closely at this "conveying" relation.

This brings me back to the issue about terminology that I began with. In some cases the relevant competence will involve substantial reliance on nonlinguistic background knowledge. For example, conveying the perceptual perspective of a demonstrative will not flow merely from application of linguistic competence to a few definite and recurrent contextual parameters. In such cases associating the conceptual perspective, or Fregean sense, of the original speaker's utterance with the report will depend on generalized intelligence. Perhaps giving a systematic account of how such perspectives relate and are associated with language is beyond the scope of semantic theory, as it is now conceived. But in the cases concerning tense or indexicals like 'yesterday' that Higginbotham discusses, it seems to me that associating at least some aspects of the original speaker's perspective with the language of the report—in particular the meaning of the reporter's indexicals—may not derive from much beyond applying a specifically linguistic competence to a relatively standard, known contextual parameter—the time of the original utterance.

Then, as Higginbotham intimates, semantic theory should concern itself with the relation between the language and the perspective. But contrary to Higginbotham's terminology, the perspective (at least the character or standing meaning of the indexicals) is linguistically preserved. And this fact supports a sense in which they are contextually "expressed" (not merely "shown") by the reporter. The information can be recovered purely by application of linguistic competence.

In such circumstances I think that there is something to be said for counting the ordinary, referentially used meaning of the original speaker's indexicals as the *ascriptive meaning* or *ascriptive content* of the reporter's indexicals (which simultaneously have their own literal meaning, referentially used). It is an open question, I think, how much of the speaker's perspective—how much of the concepts or Fregean senses thought through his

language—is to be treated by a semantic theory that concentrates on truth-conditions and specifically *linguistic* understanding. I think that a satisfying investigation of language must sometimes go beyond the bounds of linguistic meaning, or linguistic understanding, conservatively construed. Taking Higginbotham's discussion in the direction that it naturally points suggests to me that more should be treated than recent semantic theory has allowed itself.

Notes

1. For some earlier discussion of these issues, see my (1977) and (1983).

References

Burge, Tyler. 1977. Belief *De Re*. *Journal of Philosophy* 74: 338–362.

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