Does Context Change?*

Manfred Kupffer

1 The Problem

1.1 Kaplanian Semantics and Occurrence Dependence

Semantics deals both with utterances and expressions. On the one hand, if a theory does not tell us how to interpret utterances of English it is simply no semantics of English. On the other hand, meanings are meanings of expressions, i.e. of words and constructions made out of words. If we want to define the meaning of an expression, we have to take into account that content sometimes varies with the utterance. Take, e.g., the indexical “I”. A sentence like

(1) I am Fritz.

has different contents, depending on who utters it. If uttered by Fritz (1) expresses a proposition that could not possibly be false. If uttered by someone else, it expresses a proposition that could not possibly be true.

In order to capture the variability of content, David Kaplan has proposed to explicate meaning by the technical notion of character, see Kaplan (1989b). First every utterance uniquely determines a context. This notion aims at capturing the circumstances surrounding the utterance, e.g. it determines a distinguished individual, roughly who plays what may be called the speaker-role. Then characters are defined as functions from contexts to contents. E.g., the character of “I” is a function which maps every context on the distinguished individual of the context.

In the following, I will reserve the term "Kaplanian semantics" for a semantics with the following traits.1

---

* I am indebted to many people. The seminal paper on occurrence-interpretation was written by Arnim von Stechow, my teacher in semantics. The main idea of the equivalence proof in this paper has been taken from an unpublished manuscript of Ede’s, only the ontological twist to that idea is mine. It never occured to me that his permission to use that idea in a paper of my own might include an obligation to get the idea published. I am very grateful to the editors of this volume that they helped me to finally fulfill the obligation. The paper has benefitted from discussions with Ede and Ulli Haas-Spohn and comments by Ulf Friedrichsdorf, Michael Hand, Wolfgang Spohn, and Philippe Schlenker.

1 These traits are characteristic of the semantics in Kaplan (1989b). For an excellent survey of Kaplanian semantics, see Zimmermann (1991).
1. Meanings are assigned to expressions.
2. Contexts are determined by utterances.
3. Meanings are characters, functions from contexts into contents.
4. The content of a complex expression in a context $c$ is a function of the 
   contents of its constituent expressions in the same context $c$.\(^2\)

Kaplanian semantics is able to deal with cases where the content of different 
occurrences of an expression varies between different utterances. Simply 
amsume that context has changed! E.g. if “I” refers differently in $u$ from how it 
refers in $u'$, then we can safely suppose that the contexts $c$ and $c'$ determined 
by $u$ and $u'$, resp., differ in their distinguished individual.

Kaplanian semantics is unable to deal with cases where the content of different 
occurrences of an expression varies within one and the same utterance. 
1. implies that different syntactic occurrences of the same expression have the 
same meaning. With 3. every such occurrence receives the same character, and 
hence, within one and the same context, the same content. 4. implies that 
context never changes during the evaluation of a complex expression. Therefore, 
multiple occurrences of the same expression in the same utterance always 
agree in content. And this means that Kaplanian semantics is unable to deal 
with what I will call occurrence dependence (OD). An utterance $u$ exhibits OD, 
I will say, if and only if it contains (utterances of) different occurrences of the 
same expression which differ in content.

There has been a wealth of examples in the literature that purport to show 
that there is OD. While I think that many of the examples are mistaken, in the 
remainder of this section I will argue that there are, indeed, cases of OD. But 
then, Kaplanian semantics is in need of revision.\(^3\) In this paper I will com-
pare two alternatives to classical Kaplanian semantics. The first is tokenre-
flexive semantics, see García-Carpintero (1998); Kratzer (1978); Perry (1997); 
Reichenbach (1947), the second is occurrence-interpretation, Kupffer (2001); 
von Stechow (1979). These two frameworks incorporate the prototypical ways

\(^2\) At least for so-called intensional constructions. But all constructions we will be dealing 
with are intensional. (A complex expression is intensional iff it has the property that its 
content only depends on the contents of the subexpressions, not on the characters of the 
subexpressions. If an expression is not intensional it is called a monster. Kaplan thinks that 
there are no monsters).

\(^3\) Both Braun (1996) and García-Carpintero (1998) agree that Kaplan’s way to explain away 
prima facie cases of OD involving demonstratives leaves something to be desired, and that 
therefore Kaplanian semantics is in need of revision. Their line of argument is different from 
the one I discuss here.