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Beyond Kaplan: Pragmatic Interpretations and Non-Standard Uses of the First-Person Pronoun 'I'

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Abstract: In this paper I examine the adequacy of Kaplanian semantics in accounting for the interpretation of the first-person pronoun 'I'. While standard accounts following Kaplan treat 'I' as an indexical whose referent is invariably the utterer, I observe that a range of non-standard uses, such as proxy, deferred, and metonymic uses, pose challenges to this assumption. Existing Kaplan-based frameworks tend either to marginalize these cases as peripheral or to force them into a strictly semantic model, thereby leaving a gap in explaining their systematicity and interpretive coherence. My objective in this paper is to demonstrate that such non-standard uses are not anomalous but constitute a structured set of linguistic phenomena that require a pragmatic, rather than purely semantic, account. To this end, I employ a philosophical-analytic methodology combining conceptual analysis, reconstruction of theoretical commitments, and evaluation through paradigm cases and counterexamples. I first explain Kaplan's core claims about indexical reference and then test it against three categories of usage: standard utterer-referent cases, proxy or deferred uses, and metonymic uses. I argue that Kaplanian semantics, while successful for standard cases, fails to provide a unified explanation for the broader patterns of use. The main finding is that reference determination for 'I' in such contexts is systematically mediated by pragmatic factors, including speaker intentions, contextual roles, and communicative conventions. On this basis, I develop a pragmatic framework that accounts for both standard and non-standard uses of 'I' without entirely abandoning the insights of Kaplan's theory. The paper contributes to current scholarship by offering a more comprehensive account of first-person reference that integrates semantic and pragmatic dimensions, thereby extending and refining existing theories of indexicality. It also provides a strong basis for re-evaluating the limits of Kaplanian contextualism.

Keywords: Indexicals, Kaplan, Contextualism, Semantics, Pragmatics.

1. Introduction

How is the reference of the first-person pronoun 'I' determined in contexts where the apparent speaker is not straightforwardly identical with the referent? Since Kaplan's seminal account of indexicals as expressions whose content is fixed by the context of utterance, 'I' has been taken to rigidly designate the speaker. On this view, the semantic rule governing 'I' is both simple and exceptionless: it refers to the utterer of the token. However, as I shall observe here, actual language use exhibits a wider range of interpretations, including proxy uses, deferred uses, and metonymic uses. Existing responses to these phenomena tend to fall into two broad strategies. One strategy preserves Kaplan's semantics by treating such cases as pragmatically enriched but semantically deviant, thereby relegating them to the periphery of linguistic theory (e.g., Nunberg, 1993, Cappelen & Lepore, 2005; Bach, 2005). Another strategy attempts to incorporate these uses into a revised semantic framework, often by expanding the notion of context or by introducing additional parameters (e.g., Recanati 2007, Maitra 2007, Åkerman, 2017). While both approaches have yielded valuable insights, they have typically tended to be accounts of indexicals in general. As such, they fail to discuss the specific nuances that characterise 'I'. Moreover, even though proxy, deferred, and metonymic uses of 'I' have been seen some discussion, they are typically treated in isolation or as loosely related exceptions to a core rule. Accordingly, what remains underdeveloped is a unified account that explains why these uses pattern together and how they arise from general principles of interpretation. In particular, prior work has not sufficiently clarified the division of labour between semantics and pragmatics in determining first-person reference across these cases. As a result, the theoretical landscape remains fragmented, with no consensus on whether the variability in reference should be attributed to semantic flexibility or pragmatic inference.

My paper contributes to these lacunae by developing a unified pragmatic account of first-person reference that explains both standard and non-standard uses without abandoning the core insight of Kaplan's direct reference theory. Methodologically, the paper adopts a philosophical-analytic approach: it reconstructs Kaplan's original framework, and critically evaluates its explanatory scope through a series of carefully selected examples. The central claim that I advance here is that the variability in the interpretation of 'I' is not due to semantic ambiguity or context expansion, but to structured pragmatic processes that mediate reference assignment. These processes are governed by speaker intentions, socially recognized roles, and communicative conventions that license shifts in perspective. By making these mechanisms explicit, I demonstrate that non-standard uses are neither marginal anomalies nor evidence against direct reference, but rather predictable outcomes of pragmatic reasoning operating over a stable semantic core. I argue that first-person reference is pragmatically modulated rather than semantically redefined by showing that proxy, deferred, and metonymic interpretations form a systematic class best explained by general principles of pragmatic inference.

2. Literature Review

The foundational account of indexicals is provided by (David Kaplan 1989*a*; 1989*b*; 1990) whose theory of indexicals distinguishes *character* (a rule from context to content) from *content* (the proposition expressed in context). On Kaplan's view, 'I' is a pure indexical whose character rigidly maps any context to its agent, making the pronoun semantically tied to the utterer. This framework has been highly influential because it explains ordinary self-reference with theoretical with elegance and economy. Subsequent scholarship, however, has identified cases that, I shall demonstrate, strain this utterer-reference identity thesis. For example, (Alan Sidelle 1991) discusses the answering machine paradox, where recorded utterances such as 'I am not here now' appear meaningful despite temporal and contextual displacement. Although Sidelle focuses primarily on *here* and *now*, as I shall show, the case has broader implications for the interpretation of 'I'. Similarly, (Eros Corazza, William Fish, and Jonathan Gorvett 2002) argue that proxy uses, such as notes written on behalf of another person, show that competent interpreters often identify a referent other than the physical producer of the token. Another strand of literature examines metonymic and deferred reference. For instance, (Geoffrey Nunberg 1993) develops an influential theory of transferred reference, arguing that context permits expressions to denote associated entities. His work on indexicality and deixis broadens the explanatory space beyond strict Kaplanian semantics. (Allyson Mount (2008 and Jonas Åkerman 2017) extend this discussion by exploring so-called 'impure' indexicals and reference-shifting uses in which 'I' may vary across occurrences or depend on pragmatic structure.

On the pragmatics side of the debate, alternative an alternative could be found in (François Recanati, 2004), where he distinguishes primary pragmatic processes, which contribute directly to truth-conditional content, from secondary inferential processes such as implicature. This distinction, as we shall see, will be central to my contextualist attempt to explain why non-standard uses of 'I' are interpreted immediately rather than through later repair. More recent contributions by (Isidora Stojanovic, 2018), (Kemp, 2025), and (Michael Glanzberg, 2019) further connect indexical interpretation with perspective, mediated communication, self-reference, and the changing boundaries of semantic theory. Their studies explore how speakers interpret 'I' in technologically mediated settings, contested contexts of authorship, and situations involving shifts in viewpoint or expressive stance, and reconsider whether semantics alone can determine reference in increasingly complex communicative environments. Taken together, this body of work marks a decisive movement away from treating 'I' as uniformly rigid.

3. Methodology

In this paper I adopt a philosophical-analytic methodology rather than an empirical approach. Its primary aim is to evaluate two competing theories of the first-person pronoun 'I' by testing their explanatory adequacy against a structured range of linguistically and philosophically significant cases. The method integrates three components: conceptual analysis, comparative theoretical assessment, and the systematic use of paradigm cases alongside counterexamples. Rather than appealing to large-scale data, my analysis focuses on theoretically revealing instances that illuminate the underlying mechanisms of reference determination. With this in mind, I have structured the paper as follows. In the first stage I reconstruct the core commitments of Kaplan's semantic theory of indexicals. In particular, I isolate two central claims: that 'I' refers to the utterer of the token and that this reference is secured by direct reference, i.e., reference independently of descriptive mediation. Making these commitments precise will allow the paper to establish clear criteria against which their explanatory scope can be assessed. The second stage involves the selection and classification of examples according to their diagnostic relevance. Three categories of cases are examined. (i) Standard uses, in which utterer and referent coincide, serve as baseline instances that any adequate theory must successfully explain. (ii) Proxy or deferred uses introduce a divergence between the utterer of the token and the intended referent. (iii) Metonymic uses involve cases where 'I' appears to refer to an associated entity or role rather than the utterer. These examples are drawn from ordinary language usage that have been discussed in the relevant literature. In the third stage I apply comparative explanatory testing to each category. The central question is whether Kaplan's framework or a pragmatic alternative, particularly one informed by Recanati's account of context sensitivity, better captures our linguistic intuitions regarding reference, truth-conditions, interpretive immediacy, substitution patterns, and the dynamics of agreement and disagreement.

Thus, my overall argumentative strategy is an inference to the best explanation where the preferred account is the one that provides the most unified, theoretically economical, and intuitively plausible explanation across both standard and non-standard uses of 'I', without multiplying semantic assumptions unnecessarily.

4. Kaplan's Theory of Indexicals

4.1 Categorization of Indexicals

In his influential works, (Kaplan 1989a; 1989b; 1990) identifies a group of linguistic expressions he calls 'indexicals'. These are terms like 'my', 'you', 'he', 'she', 'it' etc. These are words whose references depend on the context of use, with each of their meaning providing 'a rule which determines the referent in terms of certain aspects of the context' (1989a: 490). These indexicals could be divided into two groups. First are 'demonstratives' – indexicals that are associated with 'demonstrations', i.e. 'a (visual) presentation of a local object discriminated by a pointing' (ibid). The paradigm demonstrative is 'that'. Secondly, there are the 'pure indexicals'. They are the indexicals for which 'no associated demonstration is required' (1989a: 491; author's italics). These are exemplified by 'I', 'here', 'now' etc.

4.2 Direct Reference

According to Kaplan, indexicals are expressions that are 'directly referential'. That is to say, such expressions lack any descriptive component that mediates between an expression and its referent: 'The directly referential term goes directly to its referent, directly in the sense that it does not first pass through the proposition' (1989b: 569; author's italics). Two important claims are made by Kaplan's direct reference theory. First, indexicals are indicative and not descriptive. The linguistic meaning of an indexical does not figure as a part of the referent. It behaves rather like a taxi-cab – it takes us to a certain element of the relevant context before being dismissed out of the scene. Consider the following two utterances:

(1) I am hungry.

(1*) The speaker of this utterance is hungry.

Here, the subject of (1*) is the meaning of 'I' in (1). However, (1) does not say the same thing as (1*). This is because the truth-conditions of an utterance containing 'I' are not preserved if we substitute it with a phrase like 'the agent of this utterance' (Nunberg 1993). Secondly, as an implication of the first claim, under the direct reference theory singular term expressions contribute to the overall interpretation of a proposition by referring to the individual without the mediating services of components like the Fregean Sinn. Rather than properties, the indexical expression would contribute the referent itself to the interpretation. So, in (1) the indexical 'I' contributes the utterer to the proposition unmediated by the description, 'the agent of this utterance'.

4.3 'Content' and 'Character'

For Kaplan, indexicals have two sorts of meaning. The first is 'content', which is the referent of the indexical term. Kaplan notes that an utterance like 'I was insulted yesterday' would have different meanings and truth values depending on who says it and when it was/is uttered. In other words its meaning is context-sensitive. Thus, the content of an indexical is dependent on the context and varies contextually, where a context is a structured tuple that includes an agent (the speaker), a time, a place, and a world, such that each indexical is associated with one specific parameter of that context. This context-dependence further is two-fold. The first is in terms of 'context of use' – contexts help to determine what sentences mean, i.e. contexts supply content. Secondly, context also determines the truth-value of what is being said. In other words, the content of an expression is evaluated in the 'circumstance of evaluation'. The reference of an indexical depends on the context of its use, but not on the circumstance of evaluation. For instance, suppose that Tom utters, 'I am writing now'. The context supplies 'Tom' as the referent for 'I' and '12 noon, April 30, 2026' as the referent for 'now'. The other context – Tom writing or not at the referred time – will determine whether what Tom said was true or false. Here, 'context of use' plays the former role and 'circumstance of evaluation' plays the latter role (cf. Spencer 2006: 298-9). The second kind of meaning is called 'character'. It is in some sense the linguistic meaning of the indexical expression, and is set by the linguistic conventions. It is represented by a function from contexts to contents, and is the reference-fixing rule that that remains constant throughout contexts. In the following discussion on 'I' this notion would be further clarified.

4.4 Kaplan on 'I'

In his writings, Kaplan only gives a generalized schema of indexical functioning and does not involve in elaborating 'how descriptions and demonstrations relate to contexts in determining reference' (Roberts 1994: 100). He, however, makes an exception for 'I'. According to him the meaning, i.e. character, of 'I' is given by the following three rules (1989a: 520-1):

D1. 'I' is an indexical, different utterances of which may have different contents.

D2. In each of these utterances, 'I' refers to the person who utters it.

D3. 'I' is, in each of its utterances, directly referential.

For 'I', its character is 'represented by a function from contexts to individual concepts, not from contexts to individuals'. Here the 'individual concept' is 'that content which is represented by the constant function from possible worlds to the agent of the context' (1990: 37; author's italics). Since, 'I' has a character that would not change with respect to context, the reference fixing rule associated with I would be (in accordance with D2) – 'I' (always) refers to the agent speaker or writer of the relevant context. In relation to this, (Corazza et al) observe that,

'The agent-utterer identity ensures that, for every token of 'I', the contextual parameter of the agent is identified with the utterer, the individual who uses the token. The character of 'I' then completes the task by returning the utterer (= the agent) as the referent of the token.' (2002: 2)

Thus, Kaplan assumes that the agent of 'I' will always be the utterer. As such, its referent is invariably identical to the utterer.

5. Three Uses of 'I'

5.1 Standard Uses

A use of 'I' is standard if and only if, (i) the token of 'I' is produced by an utterer u in a context c, (ii) the referent of 'I' is identical to u (the agent of the context of utterance), and (iii) no pragmatic transfer, proxying, or representational substitution is required to determine reference. Following the insight from Corazza et al above, this definition could be formally represented as follows:

Ref ('I', c) = Agent (c)

(where the left hand side means something like 'the referent of 'I' in context c', and the right hand side means something like 'the agent in c'; thus, informally, the formula says something like, 'In any given context c, the referent of 'I' is identical to the agent of c'). An utterance like (1) is a paradigmatic example of the standard use of 'I'. This is a simple use of 'I' where the utterer is identical to the referent (i.e., D2). The reference of 'I' is fixed by picking out the subject who has uttered the sentence. Thus, if (1) is uttered by Mary, 'I' will refer to Mary since she is the utterer, and if it is uttered by Raj 'I' will refer to Raj. If we imagine that Mary is actually hungry whereas Raj is not, then (1) would be true when uttered by Mary and false when uttered by Raj. Here, given Kaplan's theory, the character of 'I', i.e. the rule mapping any context c to its agent, remains constant throughout both the cases; it is the content of 'I', i.e., the agent of c, that keeps changing. Also, 'I' is directly referential here as it contributes Mary or Raj themselves to the respective propositions (i.e., D3).

These cases instantiate the core Kaplanian paradigm, which expresses a strict utterer-referent identity rule. Kaplan's framework can fully explain these cases, and it is for three reasons. Firstly, the context parameter 'agent' is sufficient to fix reference. As observed earlier, on Kaplan's framework, a context is a structured tuple that includes (at least) an agent (the speaker), a time, a place, and a world. The key idea is that each indexical is associated with one specific parameter of that context (agent, time, location, or world). For 'I', the rule (its character) is: pick out the agent of the context. To say that the agent parameter is sufficient is to say that, no further information (intentions, background knowledge, pragmatic inference etc) is needed, and once you know who is speaking, the referent of 'I' is fully determined. Thus, here, for example, when the context is that Mary is uttering (1), the referent of 'I' is immediately determined as Mary. There is no underdetermination and no need for interpretation of 'I' beyond identifying the speaker.

Secondly, no divergence occurs between the utterer and the intended referent. In standard uses, three roles coincide perfectly – (i) the utterer (the physical producer of the token 'I'), (ii) the agent of the context (Kaplan's parameter), and (iii) and the intended referent (who the speaker means by 'I'). Accordingly, there is no gap between semantics, i.e., what the rule delivers, and speaker intention, i.e., what is meant. For example, when Mary utters (1), the utterer of 'I' is Mary, the Agent (c) is Mary, and the intended referent of 'I' is also Mary.

Thirdly, substitution tests (e.g., replacing 'I' with 'the speaker of this utterance') fail in expected ways, confirming Kaplan's direct reference theory (D3). As observed earlier, a natural thought about 'I' is that 'I' just means something like 'the speaker of this utterance'. Suppose, we replace 'I' in (1) with 'the speaker of this utterance':

(1*) The speaker of this utterance is hungry.

If our natural thought is correct, then replacing 'I' with such a descriptive phrase should not change the content in any ways since they are semantically equivalent. However, as seen in section 4.2, Mary's utterance of (1) and (1*) differ in important ways. To elaborate further, for instance, a hearer can understand (1) without possessing the concept of 'the speaker of this utterance' at all (Frege 1892/1952). Moreover, they can come apart when embedded under attitude verbs. Thus, consider 'Adam believes that I am hungry' and 'Adam believes that the speaker of this utterance is hungry'. These sentence can come apart since Adam might not know who the speaker is. Accordingly, the first sentence may be true (he may believe the first sentence de re, about Mary) and the second sentence be false (not believing it de dicto, as it involves a description she cannot identify). Furthermore, descriptions like 'the speaker of this utterance' introduce descriptive content that can vary across possible worlds or epistemic contexts. For Kaplan, however, 'I' contributes only the individual, and not a property or description. Accordingly, cases of substitution failure support his theory of direct reference as 'I' does not encode a descriptive meaning like 'the speaker of this utterance' and instead directly contributes the referent itself (e.g., Mary) to the proposition. Thus, in a standard case, the proposition expressed by (1) is not something like the speaker of this utterance is hungry, but rather, Mary is hungry (with Mary herself as a constituent).

In summary, Kaplan's framework adequately explains the standard uses of 'I' as, (i) the rule Ref ('I', c) = Agent (c) always yields a unique referent, (ii) speaker, semantic value, and intended referent are identical, and (iii) 'I' contributes the individual itself, and not a description, to the proposition, thus affirming D2 and D3. But this is where the Kaplanian paradise ends; the following two uses of 'I' possesses systematic challenges to his framework.

5.2 Deferred or Proxy Uses

A use of 'I' is deferred or proxy if and only if, (i) the token of 'I' is produced by an utterer u; (ii) the intended referent is some agent · such that · ≠ u and (iii) the identification of · depends on a contextually supplied role, convention, or proxy relation (e.g., authorship, representation, institutional role, communicative delegation etc). Formally, this could be represented as follows:

Ref ('I' , c) = f (c), where f (c) ≠ Agent (c), and is fixed via a contextual proxy relation.

I discuss two examples of such uses here.

5.2.1 The Answering Machine Paradox

This paradox was introduced by (Sidelle 1991) to challenge Kaplan's claim that 'here' and 'now' refers only to the location of the utterer and the time of the utterance respectively (but one can find its precedence in (Smith 1989: 172-3). The objection is simple. Kaplan notes that utterances of the form 'I am here now' cannot be uttered falsely and are universally true (1989a: 509). Conversely it is not possible that utterances like (2) are not true:

(2) I am not here now.

Pace Kaplan, Sidelle observes that expressions of the latter form, although are seemingly contradictory, could nevertheless be true. Such statements are generally found in phone answering machines where the sentence is recorded earlier to be played when the incumbent is not around. Now the paradox is this: according to Kaplan 'I am here now' is always true. However, if the sentence is played in an answering machine and the incumbent is not there, it will be false. Sidelle's focus throughout the paper is to solve the paradoxes of 'now' and 'here'. His solution is that the utterances are deferred, i.e. the utterances take place not when the message is recorded by the speaker, but rather when the message is heard by the listener (1991: 535).

Sidelle, however, does not discuss the behaviour of 'I' in this case in any detail; he largely assumes that it refers to the person who recorded the message, i.e., the speaker of the utterance. To fit our purpose and bring the issue into sharper focus, consider a slight modification of the case. Suppose that the message in (2) is recorded not by the owner of the phone, say Mrs Pinto, but by a voice artist on behalf of Mrs Pinto who is not at home. In this scenario, the utterer and the intended referent of 'I' come apart. Nevertheless, hearers have no difficulty in understanding that the referent of 'I' in the message is Mrs Pinto, rather than the voice artist (this would be the case even if the recorded voice does not imitate Mrs Pinto's). This suggests that, contrary to the Kaplanian expectation, the referent of 'I' is not determined by the identity of the utterer in such cases.

5.2.2 The Joe and Ben Puzzle

I quote,

'Joe is not in his office one day and Ben notices that a number of students keep approaching his door and knocking. They then stand around and look bemused for a while before leaving. Taking pity on these poor souls wasting their time, Ben decides to attach his 'I am not here today' note to Joe's door. The trick works; the students, instead of knocking and waiting, take one look at the note and then leave.' (Corazza et al 2002: 5)

Now, when Joe's students look at the note they realize that 'now' and 'here' refer to, respectively, the time and the place the note is read. However, what would 'I' refer to here given that Joe has not written the note? In fact, Joe is not even aware of the fact that a note is stuck on his door. Following Kaplan, in the case of 'I' the identity of the utterer and the referent should be the same. So, since in this case Ben is the utterer of 'I' isn't he also its referent? Intuitively, the answer is negative. (Corazza et al 2002) give two reasons for this (2002: 6). When Joe's students read the note, they immediately interpret 'now' and 'here' as referring to the time and place of reading respectively. The case of 'I', however, is more complicated. Since Joe did not write the note – he is in fact unaware of its existence – Kaplan's account would predict that 'I' refers to Ben, the note's author. Yet this prediction is not borne out as the students unhesitatingly take 'I' to refer to Joe, the office occupant. (Corazza et al. 2002: 6) argue that this interpretation is correct for at least two reasons. Firstly, given Sidelle's notion of deferred utterance, Joe himself could have attached Ben's note, in which case Ben's token of 'I' would still be naturally understood as referring to Joe. This suggests that the mere fact of Ben authoring the note does not secure the reference to himself. Secondly, it was Ben's intention that 'I' should refer to Joe, and not to himself; to insist that 'I' refers to Ben would be analogous to claiming that a voice artist is the referent of 'I' in all answering-machine messages, a conclusion that is clearly untenable. While a fuller account of why Joe is the referent will be developed later, the crucial point for now is that the referent of 'I' diverges from the utterer in this case. This divergence indicates that Kaplan's account fails to apply universally.

5.2.3 Why Kaplan's Account Fails?

According to Kaplan's theory, for any context c, the reference of 'I' is fixed by the rule: Ref ('I', c) = Agent (c). But if that is correct, then in the cases considered so far, 'I' should refer to the producer of the token, viz., the voice artist in the answering-machine case and Ben in the office-note case. However, as we just observed, this prediction is not merely false, but it also fails to capture how competent language users actually interpret such utterances. The failure here is best understood as a challenge specifically to Kaplan's utterer-reference identity thesis (i.e., D2). This challenge manifests in the following ways.

Firstly, pace Kaplan, there is a repeatable mismatch between the producer of the token (i.e., the utterer), and the individual picked out in interpretation (i.e., the referent). For instance, when the voice artist records (2), the utterer is the voice artist. However, the interpreted referent is Mrs Pinto. Crucially for us, hearers do not even momentarily consider the voice artist as the referent, such that, the interpretation 'the voice artist is not here' is not just false, but is not even entertained as a candidate meaning. What this demonstrates is that D2 not merely yields the wrong answer, but it yields an answer that is systematically ignored by competent language users. Accordingly, this mismatch is not just a rare confusion, but rather a regular feature of the whole class of such cases.

Secondly, interpretations of the utterances track not the utterers, but represented individuals (cf. Stojanovic 2018). For instance, when Ben writes 'I am not here today' and posts it on Joe's door, Ben is the physical producer of the sentence, but the interpreted referent is the office occupant, i.e., Joe. That is to say, the note is about the status of the office occupant, and the students immediately interpret 'I' in terms of whoever the note represents, viz., Joe. The interpretation stabilizes at Joe even if we vary surface features like writing the note in a different handwriting or typing it instead of handwriting (just as would be the case even if there was a mismatch between the voice on the answering machine and Mrs Pinto's). This shows that the interpretation is not sensitive to the identity of the utterer at all and tracks only a role-bearing individual – in this case, the person whose absence the note communicates. Once again, these intuitions indicate a systematic mechanism of reference-fixing as the interpretations are immediate (no inferential reasoning required), shared across speakers, and insensitive to perturbations in terms who actually produced the token.

Thirdly, these phenomena cannot be dismissed merely as instances of pragmatics compatible with Kaplan's semantics. A Kaplanian might argue that the literal semantic content still concerns the utterer, and that the shift to the intended referent (Mrs Pinto or Joe) is a matter of speaker meaning or pragmatic inference. However, this line of response is untenable for two reasons. On the one hand, as observed earlier, there is no evidence that hearers ever access the utterer-based interpretation, and hence, there is no independently available 'literal content' that is subsequently enriched or overridden. On the other hand, the determination of the referent in these cases is immediate, automatic, and shared across competent language users, thus exhibiting a lack of inferential interpretational process. The relevant contextual factors, such as the conventional function of answering machines or office notes, do not merely supplement a semantically determined content, but they are constitutive of reference determination itself.

Finally, a key insight borne out of these examples is that reference is fixed via socially and contextually defined roles, such as the owner of the phone, the occupant of the office etc. These roles are publicly recognizable, guided by social conventions, and triggered by situational cues (e.g., answering machines, door notes etc). Crucially, Kaplan's framework fails to include such contextual parameters (his parameters are limited to agent, time, location, and world). Accordingly, when, in proxy cases, the actual referent is determined by something like 'the individual whose communicative role is instantiated in this setting', Kaplan's semantics will only allow for 'the individual who produced this token'. His theory, thus, lacks the resources to even represent the factors that fix such references.

One might try to rescue Kaplan by redefining the agent as the 'intended speaker', or appealing to speaker intentions. This, however, will undermine the core Kaplanian idea that character is a stable, purely semantic rule, and reference is fixed automatically by his context parameters. Once roles, intentions, and conventions enter the scene, the account becomes pragmatic (about which we will have more to say later), and no longer purely Kaplanian.

Thus, Kaplan's rule is too rigid as it assumes that there is always a single privileged individual, viz., the utterer, who determines reference. In contrast, proxy cases demonstrate that reference can be systematically anchored to a non-utterer, selected via contextually salient roles.

In light of these considerations, proxy uses of 'I' constitute counterexamples to Kaplan's utterer-reference thesis (D2). They show that the referent of 'I' need not be the utterer, and that reference can be systematically fixed by contextually salient roles that are not encoded in Kaplan's semantic framework. The problem, therefore, is not that Kaplan's theory requires supplementation by pragmatics at the margins, but that its core rule for 'I' fails to capture a significant and systematically occurring class of uses.

5.3 Metonymic Uses

A use of 'I' is metonymic if and only if (i) the utterer u is the agent of the context, but (ii) the referent is an entity ε that stands in a salient associative relation to u (e.g., possession, control, representation etc), and (iii) reference is determined via pragmatic transfer (loosening or shifting along an association). Formally, this could be represented as follows:

Ref ('I' , c) = g (Agent (c)), where g maps the speaker to a contextually salient associated entity ・.

Examples of this sort are the ones where 'I' is used mostly for impersonal objects. For example in a game of Monopoly I might say,

(3) I am on a purple square

where 'I' refers to the shoe-shaped piece on the board. Similarly, a car owner might utter (4) where 'I' refers to his car,

(4) I am out of fuel.

In (3) and (4), the contextually salient entities associated with the speakers are, respectively, the speaker's game piece and the speaker's car. Accordingly, in these cases 'I' is naturally interpreted as referring to those associated entities rather than to the speaker themselves.

5.3.1 A Kaplanian View

If D2 is correct and 'I' always refers to its utterer, then the tokens of 'I' in (3) and (4) cannot refer to the game piece and the car respectively. One way to defend this view is to say that the predicates in the sentences i.e., 'on a purple square' and 'out of fuel' are used non-literally. (Nunberg 1993) takes this position and argues that it is the speaker himself who is, say, out of fuel. This is because otherwise a relative clause will be applied to the personal pronoun which is inappropriate. Thus, (4) will have to be understood as,

(4*) I, a red Ford, am out of fuel.

Here 'a red Ford' has a rather improper anaphoric relation to 'I' and so cannot be its referent. This, thus, preserves the rule, Ref ('I', c) = Agent (c), and explains the metonymic uses by saying that 'I' still refers to the speaker, but the predicates in (3) and (4) are used non-literally.

5.3.2 Problems with the Kaplanian View

Despite this defence of Kaplan by Nunberg, the view still fails to account for a number of issues. Firstly, as (Elizabeth Camp 2017) observes, such a Kaplanian view reverses what linguistically competent speakers and hearers actually do by misplacing the non-literal interpretation. In ordinary linguistic understanding of such sentences, we do not reinterpret what it would mean for a person to be 'out of fuel'. Rather, we immediately reinterpret who 'I' refers to in such sentences. That is to say, our interpretation of the predicate remains perfectly literal (e.g., cars can be out of fuel); the interpretational shift rather occurs in the referent of the subject, i.e., 'I'. To see this, the interpretation of (4) as 'The speaker (a human) is literally out of fuel' seems rather conceptually strained. However, its interpretation as 'The car is out of fuel' sounds perfectly natural. Thus, pace Nunberg, the pressure of non-literal interpretation falls on the subject, and not the predicate.

Secondly, in relation to the above point, one could test where the non-literal meaning is located by observing how a hearer would contradict a speaker's metonymic utterances (e.g., Mount 2008: 201). Thus, if someone is to contradict my utterance of (4) they would say, for example, 'No, I think you still have some fuel left; your Fuel Light is not on yet', and not give me a glass of petrol to drink believing that I, the utterer, runs on petrol. His response is based on the belief that in uttering (4) 'I' refers to my car, and not me, the utterer. Similarly, anyone hearing me utter (3) during a game of Monopoly would contradict my utterance by saying something like, 'No, you are on the green square'. If they say, 'No, you are on the sofa', we will just shrug them off as being purposely difficult. What such patterns of disagreement reveal are the propositions that hearers take to be naturally expressed by such utterances. In (3) and (4) the propositions understood to be expressed are that the speaker's game piece is on the purple square and that the speaker's car is out of fuel, and not that speaker is on the purple square and the speaker is out of fuel respectively (whether literally or not). Consequently, if Nunberg were right, then the contradiction should target the speaker; it, however, does not. Accordingly, the truth-conditions of the sentences are evaluated with respect to the game piece and the car, and as such, the referents of 'I' must be the game piece and the car. This, thus, provides strong evidence that in metonymic uses of 'I', reference shifts at the level of the indexical itself.

A Kaplanian might attempt to maintain that the semantic content still concerns the speaker, and that the shift to the associated object is a matter of pragmatic enrichment layered on top of this content. But this response faces the same difficulty noted in proxy cases: there is no independent evidence that the speaker-based interpretation is ever computed or plays any role in comprehension. The interpretation that hearers arrive at – the car being out of fuel, the game piece being on a purple square – is immediate, automatic, and non-inferential. Thus, the appeal to 'mere pragmatics' cannot preserve Kaplan's semantics against metonymic uses.

In sum, metonymic uses of 'I' show that the referent of the pronoun is not always given directly by the agent of the context, nor is it contributed to the proposition without mediation. At this juncture, it is important to distinguish the present challenge from that posed by proxy cases. In metonymic uses, the utterer remains the agent of the context, and there is no competing candidate speaker, as in the answering-machine or office-note cases. Accordingly, these examples do not straightforwardly refute the utterer-reference thesis (D2) in the same way. Rather, they show that even when the utterer is fixed, the referent of 'I' can be systematically determined via a contextually mediated mapping from the speaker to an associated entity (i.e., challenging D3, about which we shall say more later).

Rather, reference is fixed via contextually guided transfer from the speaker to a salient associated entity. While these cases do not always involve a simple divergence between utterer and referent, they nonetheless undermine the Kaplanian picture by demonstrating that the contribution of 'I' is not strictly direct. The challenge, therefore, is primarily to the doctrine of direct reference (D3): the semantic role of 'I' cannot be fully specified without appeal to pragmatic processes that determine which entity is ultimately contributed to the proposition.

6. The Pragmatic View

Quite a few theories have been developed over the years to account for a pragmatic understanding of language. The most prominent of them have been the implicature theory developed by Grice (1989), and the relevance theory developed by (Sperber and Wilson 1986). However, what strikes me as the most promising candidates to account for all the data given above is the pragmatic theory developed by Recanati in his book Literal Meaning (2004).

6.1 Recanati's Pragmatic Framework

Here, rather than treating Recanati's framework merely as a general background theory, I shall use its central notions to explain the three types of 'I' uses identified above and, crucially, where Kaplan's framework fails.

6.1.1 Primary Pragmatic Processes

(Recanati 2004) distinguishes between two types of pragmatic processes – primary and secondary. Secondary processes are typically inferential, in that a speaker's utterance is understood to imply something further (e.g., if someone asks me whether I am going to the party, my reply that 'I have to work' would be understood to mean that I am not going to the party). By contrast, primary processes operate non-inferentially, thus directly contributing to what is said. These include both linguistically mandated processes as well as context-driven mechanisms such that contextual information is automatically integrated into interpretation, thus shaping truth-conditional content without requiring conscious inference on the part of the hearer. For our purpose, this distinction is crucial for evaluating whether non-standard uses of 'I' can be dismissed as mere pragmatics compatible with Kaplanian semantics. If the relevant processes are secondary, then Kaplanian semantics could remain intact with pragmatics merely adding further meaning. However, if they are primary, then they are involved in fixing reference itself, and Kaplan's semantics loses its explanatory role.

In section 5.2 we observed that in answering machine and office-note cases, the identification of the referent (e.g., Mrs Pinto or Joe) is immediate and non-inferential – hearers do not first evaluate an utterer-based proposition and then revise it. Rather, the referent is fixed directly via contextual cues. This indicates that the process is primary, and not secondary. As such, the Kaplanian content (the utterer) is not first computed and then pragmatically enriched; it is bypassed altogether. Recanati's framework thus explains why these cases are genuine counterexamples to the D2 notion of utterer-reference identity, rather than peripheral pragmatic phenomena. Similarly, in section 5.3 we observed that in utterances like (3) and (4), the shift from speaker to the game piece or car is immediate and automatic. There is no mediating stage where the speaker is treated as the literal referent and then reinterpreted. This again supports the claim that reference determination involves primary pragmatic processes, thereby challenging the D3 idea that 'I' contributes its referent directly.

6.1.2 Semantic Competition and Accessibility

According to Recanati, one of the important primary pragmatic processes is transfer (2004: 23-7). On his account, transfer begins with the activation of an expression's literal meaning, which in turn triggers a network of associated representations. These candidates, both literal and non-literal, enter into a process of semantic competition, where the most contextually appropriate interpretation is selected. Thus, consider Nunberg's example, 'The ham sandwich has left without paying' (Nunberg, 1979). Although the phrase initially activates the literal representation of a sandwich, it also evokes related possibilities, such as the person who ordered it. When the predicate is processed, the latter proves to be the more coherent fit, and is therefore selected as the intended referent. In other words, the non-literal representation is a more accessible candidate than the literal one. This selection is not the result of conscious inference but of an automatic process. Importantly, such transfer operates locally at the level of individual expressions, while remaining sensitive to broader contextual factors. Unlike secondary processes, this process is not reflective and inferential; it is a fast, automatic selection mechanism (Recanati 2004).

Following this, in the answering machine case, the utterer (voice artist) is activated, but so is the role of the phone's owner. Given the communicative setting, the latter is overwhelmingly more accessible, and thus the referent stabilizes at the phone's owner, Mrs Pinto. Again, the Kaplanian referent is not overridden. Rather, it simply loses in the competition and never enters the final interpretation. This suggests that Kaplan's rule does not provide a psychological default, whereas Recanati's model predicts exactly this pattern of selection. Similarly, consider (4): 'I am out of fuel.' The literal interpretation of 'I' here activates the speaker, but also associated entities such as the speaker's car. But given the predicate 'out of fuel', the representation of the car is far more accessible than that of the speaker. As a result, it is selected as the referent of 'I'. This thus explains why the shift occurs at the level of 'I', rather than the predicate – the predicate imposes constrains on which candidate is most accessible. Kaplan's framework, by contrast, lacks any mechanism for such competition. It rigidly fixes the referent as the agent of the context, and thus cannot explain why the speaker is not even considered as a candidate interpretation in these cases.

6.1.3 Schemata and Contextual Fit

The goal of such interpretive processes is to achieve, inter alia, coherence in interpretation. The accessibility of competing representations depends on how well they align with both linguistic and extra-linguistic context. To explain this alignment, Recanati introduces the concept of schemata – abstract structures that guide linguistic interpretation. For instance, a predicate can activate a schema that different candidate meanings attempt to satisfy. In one case, a derived interpretation may better fit the schema, while in another, the literal meaning is more appropriate. Interpretive success largely depends on a candidate's accessibility, which increases when it fits an abstract schema <α, β>. Schemata are triggered by expressions whose meanings correspond to aspects of the schema, and in turn, they enhance the activation of compatible interpretations. When multiple elements reinforce the same schema, their combined accessibility makes them more likely to be selected. Thus, coherent, schema-driven interpretations are preferred over less integrated ones (Recanati 2004: 36-7). Additionally, schemata can be activated by contextual, extra-linguistic cues, a notion anticipated by Fillmore's idea of interpretation frames (1982).

Now consider the Joe-and-Ben case. Here, the presence of a door note activates a familiar schema: notes on doors communicate the status of the occupant. This schema strongly favours Joe as the referent of 'I', regardless of who physically wrote the note. The schema also excludes irrelevant candidates (e.g., Ben, a student, a passerby etc), thereby explaining the stability and uniformity of interpretation. Similarly, in the Monopoly case, the game context activates a schema in which players are represented by game pieces. Within this schema, the mapping from player to game piece is highly salient, making the latter the natural referent of 'I' in statements about board position. Again, this selection is driven by contextual fit and not by any rule that identifies the utterer as the referent. As observed earlier, Kaplan's framework cannot capture this phenomenon because its notion of context is too restricted, thus lacking the resources to explain why certain candidates are systematically more privileged in interpretation.

6.2 A Pragmatic Account of 'I'

The preceding discussion allows us to move beyond a purely critical stance toward Kaplan and to offer a positive, unified account of the interpretation of 'I'. On a Recanatian framework, the reference of 'I' is not fixed by a rigid semantic rule tied to the agent, but is instead the output of primary pragmatic processes operating over a range of contextually available candidates. Here, the linguistic meaning of 'I' serves to activate a privileged starting point, i.e., the speaker, while leaving open the possibility of systematic shifts driven by contextual fit. This framework yields a principled explanation of all three types of uses identified in section 5.

6.2.1 Standard Uses

In standard cases such as (1), the Kaplanian result is preserved, but for different reasons. The utterer is initially activated as the default candidate for 'I', and no competing candidate is sufficiently accessible to displace it. The relevant schema, i.e., ordinary self-ascription, strongly favours the speaker as the argument of a predicate like 'am hungry'. Accordingly, the speaker wins the semantic competition, and the referent of 'I' coincides with the agent of the context. Crucially, this outcome is not enforced by a rigid semantic rule of the form Ref ('I', c) = Agent (c), but emerges from the interaction of accessibility, predicate constraints, and contextual coherence. In this sense, Recanati's account subsumes the Kaplanian insight: it explains why 'I' typically refers to the utterer, while also allowing for systematic exceptions.

6.2.2 Proxy Uses

In proxy cases, such as answering-machine messages or notes written on behalf of others, the interpretive dynamics are significantly different. Thus, consider (2) uttered via an answering machine or written on an office door. Here, the utterer (voice artist or writer) is initially activated, but the communicative setting simultaneously activates a role-based schema answering-machine messages report the status of the phone's owner, or door notes report the status of the office occupant. Within this schema, the role-bearer (e.g., Mrs Pinto or Joe) is far more accessible than the utterer as a candidate for 'I'. As a result, the role-based candidate systematically wins the semantic competition. Crucially, as discussed earlier, this process is pre-reflective and automatic: hearers do not infer that the utterer is speaking on behalf of someone else; rather, they directly interpret the utterance as being about the relevant role-holder. The utterer-based interpretation is not merely rejected; it is never seriously entertained.

This explains why proxy cases are not instances of pragmatic enrichment layered on top of a Kaplanian core. There is no stage at which the utterer is treated as the referent and then replaced. Instead, the referent is fixed from the outset by contextually salient roles. The pragmatic process is therefore constitutive of reference determination, not supplementary to it.

6.2.3 Metonymic Uses

In metonymic cases, such as (3) and (4), the utterer remains fixed (like in standard cases, but unlike in proxy cases). However, this serves as a point of departure for a transfer process. The literal interpretation activates the utterer, which in turn activates a network of associated entities (e.g., possessions, representations, controlled objects). The predicate then plays a decisive role in selecting the most appropriate candidate. In (4), the predicate 'out of fuel' activates a schema involving vehicles. Within this schema, the speaker's car is far more accessible than the speaker. Consequently, the referent of 'I' shifts to the car. Similarly, in the Monopoly case, the game context activates a schema in which players are represented by game pieces, making the game piece the most coherent candidate for 'I' in statements about board position.

Now, it has also been observed that occurrences of standard and metonymic uses of 'I' could be found in the same sentence, i.e. there could also be intra-sentential shifts of reference (see Mount 2008: 208, and Åkerman 2017). Thus, consider the following sentence uttered in the midst of a Monopoly game:

(5) I know that I am on a purple square.

A normal interpreter would fix the referent of the first 'I' on the player-utterer, and the second 'I' on the game-piece. This, again, is owing to our tendency to prefer coherent interpretations – interchanging the referents would leave us with an incoherent interpretation rendering the sentence unintelligible. In (5), for instance, the speaker herself is a better candidate than her game-piece for the status of argument for '…know that', while the game-piece is a better candidate for the status of the argument of '…is on a purple square'. Therefore, the literal candidate is retained for the first occurrence, while the non-literal candidate is retained for the second.

6.2.4 A Unified Account

Taken together, these three types of cases support a unified picture of the semantics–pragmatics interface for 'I'. The linguistic meaning of 'I' does not encode a rigid rule fixing reference to the utterer. Rather, it provides a default anchor, vis., the speaker, from which interpretation proceeds via primary pragmatic processes. These processes generate a range of candidate referents, which are then filtered and selected on the basis of accessibility, predicate compatibility, and schema-driven coherence. This framework has two major advantages over Kaplan's. Firstly, it explains why standard uses of 'I' overwhelmingly yield the speaker as referent, without treating this as an exceptionless rule. Secondly, it systematically accounts for the non-standard uses of 'I' without relegating them to marginal or secondary pragmatic phenomena. In both types of non-standard cases, the Kaplanian referent is not merely overridden but plays no role in determining the truth-conditions of the utterance. Accordingly, the reference of 'I' should be seen as pragmatically determined at a primary level, with semantics providing only the initial conditions for this process. This not only resolves the problems raised in section 5 but also suggests a more general revision of the Kaplanian picture: indexical reference is not fixed by invariant semantic rules alone, but emerges from the interaction between linguistic meaning and contextually guided pragmatic mechanisms.

6.2.5 Kaplan vs Recanati: A Comparison

The contrast between Kaplan's semantic account and the pragmatic framework developed here can be brought into sharper focus by examining how each theory handles the same range of examples. The key question is whether the reference of 'I' is fixed by a stable semantic rule tied to the utterer, or by context-sensitive pragmatic processes that may override or bypass that rule. The following table 1 summarizes the competing predictions.

6.2.6 Objections and Replies

Objection 1: Overgeneration of Non-Utterer Readings

One criticism of pragmatic and contextualist accounts is that they risk overgenerating interpretations. Arguments of this form have been mounted by a number of philosophers (e.g., Bach 2001; Borg 2004; Cappelen and Lepore 2015: ch. 3), who emphasises the need for minimal semantic content to avoid overgeneration. In the present context, the objection takes the following form: if the reference of 'I' is determined via pragmatic processes such as accessibility and schema-based selection, what prevents the theory from licensing an unbounded range of speaker-associated entities (e.g., possessions, acquaintances, or arbitrary contextually salient items) as referents?

Table 1. Comparative analysis of the interpretation of "I" in standard and non-standard uses under Kaplan's and Recanati's accounts.

Case	Utterer (Agent)	Interpreted Referent of 'I'	Kaplan's Prediction	Where Kaplan Fails	Recanati's Explanation
Standard Use ('I am hungry')	Mary	Mary	Ref ('I') = Agent (*c*) = Mary; direct reference	No failure	Speaker is most accessible candidate; no competing interpretations; schema of self-ascription selects the utterer.
Deferred Use (Answering Machine)	Voice artist	Mrs Pinto (phone owner)	Ref ('I') = voice artist	Predicts wrong referent; utterer-based content not even entertained	Role-based schema (phone-owner) makes Mrs Pinto most accessible; primary pragmatic process fixes reference directly
Proxy Use (Joe & Ben)	Ben (writer of the note)	Joe (office occupant)	Ref ('I') = Ben	Systematic mismatch; interpretation tracks role, not utterer	Door-note schema activates 'occupant' role; Joe wins semantic competition; utterer irrelevant
Metonymic Use (Car: 'I am out of fuel')	Speaker	Speaker's car	Ref ('I') = speaker; predicate must be figurative	Mislocates non-literalness; wrong truth-conditions	Predicate activates vehicle-schema; car is most accessible candidate; transfer shifts reference
Metonymic Use (Monopoly: 'I am on a purple square')	Player	Player's game piece	Ref ('I') = player	Cannot explain why player is not evaluated as referent	Player is represented by a game piece within the game schema; game piece best fits predicate; selected via accessibility
Mixed Case ('I know that I am on a purple square.')	Player	First 'I'= player Second 'I' = game piece	Both tokens of 'I' refer to utterer	Cannot explain intra-sentential shift	Different predicates activate different schema; separate competitions yield distinct referents

In response, this concern can be met by emphasizing that the pragmatic processes invoked here are highly constrained. Given our Recanatian framework, it could be suggested that schemas impose structural constraints on interpretation. As we have observed, contexts such as answering machine messages, door notes, or board games activate well-established interpretive frames that sharply limit the range of eligible referents. Only individuals occupying the relevant role (e.g., phone owner, office occupant, game piece) are licensed. Beyond this, predicate compatibility can also function as a semantic filter. In cases like 'I am out of fuel', only entities that can literally satisfy the predicate like 'out of fuel' etc are viable candidates. This ensures the exclusion of the vast majority of other speaker-associated entities. Moreover, what the above examples demonstrate is that accessibility itself governs selection among candidates. Although multiple representations may be activated, only those that are maximally coherent with the linguistic and extra-linguistic context survive the competition. The result is a single, stable interpretation shared across competent speakers. These constraints ensure that the account does not overgenerate. On the contrary, it predicts the observed uniformity and immediacy of interpretation, while explaining why Kaplanian utterer-based readings are systematically unavailable in the relevant cases.

Objection 2: Attribution without Agency

Now, a similar objection could be mounted specifically against our reasoning in the proxy cases. Given that Joe has not even the faintest of an idea that such a note has been stuck on his door – far less him writing it, or even intending that someone else write it for him – couldn't any utterance be made on his behalf in whose production Joe has absolutely no role? Suppose that Ben, now as a prank, stuck another note on Joe's door:

(6) I think the Chancellor is a fool.

Given our discussions in section 5.2, 'I' here would certainly refer to Joe – or at least is meant to refer to Joe. But if that is the case, then it would be appropriate for Joe's students to believe that he actually means what is uttered in (6). That, however, seems intuitively inappropriate – competent language users typically would not take 'I' here to refer to Joe, and understand (6) merely as a joke. According to this objection the worry is that, if proxy uses allow 'I' to refer to Joe even when he neither authored nor intended the note, what prevents any content from being attributed to him?

Now, in the ordinary door-note case ('I am not here today'), the situation activates a familiar convention: notes on an office door typically convey the occupant's availability. This frame permits both (i) a shift in reference (from writer to occupant), and (ii) attribution of a role-appropriate content (which, in our case, is absence). Because the content fits the role, hearers treat the message as speaking for Joe. The prank case, however, differs crucially at the level of non-linguistic context. A message like (6) does not fit the conventional function of a door notice. Instead, it activates a different schema, i.e., of a joke/prank. In such schemas, interpreters suspend the normal assumption that the apparent speaker (Joe) is the source of the attitude expressed. It restricts the contents to those that only belongs to the role. And since such insults do not fit in, the attribution fails. As a result, even if 'I' itself is interpreted as picking out Joe, in the context of the sentence as a whole, hearers do not take Joe to mean the proposition. Thus, the context of a joke imposes certain constraints on interpretation such that the appropriate response is amusement, and not belief attribution.

7. Conclusion, Limitation and Recommendation

In this paper, I examined the interpretation of the first-person pronoun 'I' beyond the limits of standard Kaplanian semantics, with particular attention to proxy, deferred, and metonymic uses. My aim has not been merely to challenge Kaplan's view that 'I' rigidly refers to the utterer, but to identify and explain a persistent gap in existing accounts, viz., their inability to provide a unified explanation for the systematic variability observed in actual linguistic practice. By bringing together the non-standard uses under a single analytical framework, I have argued that they are neither marginal anomalies nor evidence of semantic breakdown, but rather predictable outcomes of primary pragmatic processes operating over a stable semantic core.

A central contribution of my paper is in clarifying the division of labour between semantics and pragmatics in the determination of first-person reference. While Kaplan's insight that 'I' is directly referential remains intact for standard cases, the analysis has shown that this semantic rule does not, by itself, exhaust the interpretive possibilities of the pronoun. Instead, reference assignment in a broader range of contexts is systematically mediated by pragmatic factors such as speaker intentions, institutional roles, and communicative conventions. In this respect, I advance a position that is neither a rejection and nor a simple extension of Kaplanian theory, but rather, a reconfiguration of its scope: semantics provides a default rule, while pragmatics governs principled departures from that default. This reconceptualization has implications for a wider debate in the status of indexicals and the limits of direct reference. Much of the existing literature has been polarized between preserving a strict semantic account and expanding the semantics to accommodate apparent counterexamples. By contrast, my account shifts the focus toward the explanatory power of pragmatic inference, suggesting that the variability of first-person reference need not be captured by increasingly complex semantic machinery. In doing so, my paper contributes to a growing body of work that emphasizes the role of context-sensitive reasoning in language interpretation, while also offering a more systematic treatment of first-person reference than has typically been provided in discussions of proxy or deferred uses.

At the same time, the analysis presented here is subject to certain limitations. Firstly, the argument has been primarily theoretical and illustrative, relying on constructed examples and conceptual analysis rather than empirical data. While this approach is appropriate for clarifying foundational distinctions, it leaves open the question of how these pragmatic mechanisms operate in real-time language processing and across different linguistic communities. Secondly, my focus here has been restricted to a relatively narrow set of non-standard uses, and as such, further work is needed to determine whether the proposed framework can be extended to other borderline cases, such as collective uses of 'I' or instances involving ambiguous or contested speaker roles. Third, although the paper has argued for a pragmatic account of reference shift, it has not fully formalized the mechanisms involved, leaving room for future work to articulate these processes in more precise theoretical terms. These limitations point toward several promising directions for future research. One such direction concerns the interpretation of 'I' in recorded or mediated speech, where the temporal and spatial separation between utterance and reception complicates the identification of the relevant speaker. Another area of interest is the use of 'I' in role-play, theatrical performance, and fictional discourse, where speakers routinely adopt perspectives that diverge from their actual identities. These contexts raise important questions about how audiences track referential shifts and how conventions governing such shifts are learned and maintained. A further line of inquiry involves digital communication, including social media, virtual environments, and AI-mediated interaction, where the notion of a stable speaker is increasingly diffuse (Kemp 2025). In such settings, the interpretation of 'I' may depend on complex layers of authorship, representation, and platform-specific norms.

In light of these considerations, the broader significance of my paper lies in its attempt to move beyond a binary opposition between semantic rigidity and semantic flexibility. By demonstrating that the interpretation of 'I' is shaped by structured pragmatic processes, the analysis provides a more nuanced account of indexical reference – one that preserves the core insights of direct reference theory while accommodating variety in actual language use (cf. Glanzberg 2019). Ultimately, the paper invites a rethinking of how linguistic theory models the interaction between rule-governed meaning and context-sensitive inference, not only for 'I', but for indexicals more generally.

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