WHY SEMANTIC UNSPECIFICITY IS NOT INDEXICALITY

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ABSTRACT

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In this paper, I address the idea that certain sentences ("It's raining", "The leaves are green", "Sally reads an Italian book") suffer from what is generally called semantic unspecificity: their meaning is determinate, but their truth conditions are not. While there tends to be agreement on the idea that semantic unspecificity differs from phenomena such as ambiguity and vagueness, some theorists have defended an account which traces it to indexicality, broadly construed. Some authors have tried to vindicate the distinction between unspecificity and indexicality and, in this paper, I pursue the same cause, but with a critical stance towards previously employed strategies. I urge that the central argument employed by Sainsbury to trace this difference fails suitably to set unspecificity apart from indexicality and I propose a new argument, which helps to trace this distinction more perspicuously. The argument is based on embeddings of indexical and unspecific expressions within modal operators and on the ways in which the truth conditions of utterances of the resulting, complex expressions are thereby affected.

Keywords: semantic unspecificity, semantic underdeterminacy, indexicality, rigidity, intensional contexts

1. Some background on semantic unspecificity

The focus of this paper is the specific kind of semantic indeterminacy that afflicts sentences like the following:

(1) It's raining.
(2) The leaves are green.
(3) Sally reads an Italian book.

The problem with these sentences is that their linguistic meaning fails to determine a truth-condition for their utterances. For instance, the linguistic meaning of (1) is just that it is raining at the time of utterance (where the temporal information is supposed to be encoded in the present tense), but there is no word which stands for a locational aspect. The semantics of the sentence thus seems to fall short of specifying in which conditions an utterance of (1) is true. As to (2), it just says that the leaves are green, where this is unspecific between the leaves being green, for instance, on the outer surface or as their natural shade (perhaps covered by a red dye). Finally, (3) simply states that Sally reads an Italian book, but in what sense the book is Italian remains unspecified. Is it written in Italian? Has it been printed in Italy? And so on. Theorists regard sentences (1)-(3) as having a meaning which is "too poor" to specify a content for their utterances. Following Sainsbury (2002), I use the term *semantic unspecificity* to refer to this kind of phenomenon, which falls under the head-

ing of the broader phenomenon of semantic under-determinacy (cf. Carston 2002).

Unspecificity seems to be a peculiar phenomenon, quite different from other kinds of semantic indeterminacy. Firstly, there seems to be a difference between unspecific and *ambiguous* terms. Let us focus on the ambiguity that arises from polysemy: polysemous words such as "newspaper" consist in single lexical entries to which the dictionary assigns more than one meaning. Moreover, although the number of meanings can increase or decrease in time, it is generally definite and the meanings themselves are clearly identifiable (for instance, "newspaper publishing company", "newspaper editorial committee", "newspaper issue (type)", "newspaper issue (token)"). The latter conditions may be connected with facilitating language acquisition and memory, meaning that a single polysemous word may be more difficult to learn and competently apply if its meanings are indefinitely many and not clearly identifiable. Now, one could suppose that a word like "green" is polysemous too and therefore associated with many meanings: $green_1$, $green_2$, $green_3$,... $green_n$, according to what the speaker means with her use of "green" in different situations. However, since there are indefinitely many ways for something to be green and for it to be competently so called, this would lead to indefinitely many meanings for the word-*type* "green" which are not clearly identifiable (since we cannot clearly identify all the situations in which something can competently be called "green"). Thus, the constraint of meanings being definitely many and clearly identifiable would be violated. So, *prima facie* at least, we seem to have good reasons for resisting the claim that unspecificity is just polysemy (for further arguments, see Travis 1997 and Bezuidenhout 2002).

Unspecific expressions also seem to depart from vague expressions, although I believe one should concede that "to rain", "being green", "being Italian" etc. are *also* vague. If we assume that a necessary feature of vagueness is the presence of borderline cases, then there are certainly borderline cases of application for these expressions, for there are borderline cases of raining, of being green and even—arguably—of being Italian. However, the particular defectiveness that makes these expressions semantically unspecific is not, I argue, connected with their being vague. To illustrate, consider an utterance of "It's raining", which one assesses as not determinately true or false (maybe because drops of water are falling from the sky at too large a distance from each other). Now it seems that, in order for one to be able to say that the utterance doesn't have a definite evaluation in the first place, one needs to specify the location where the phenomenon is taking place—Paris, Venice, London etc. That is, in order to judge the vagueness of the statement "It's raining" one must previously resolve its semantic unspecificity as to the location of the rain. These considerations seem to make for the idea that semantic unspecificity doesn't coincide with vagueness, for the former needs to be dealt with "before" the latter is ascribed (for further arguments, cf. again Travis 1997, Bezuidenhout 2002). Moreover (and in connection with what has just been remarked), theorists often talk about vagueness as a matter of *degree*: for instance, they focus on what degree of hairlessness one must possess in order to count as bald; whereas often when theorists talk of unspecificity, they address it as a matter of multiple *dimensions*, each of which allows for degrees: for instance, where does an object have to be green in order for it to count as such? Or how does it have to be green? And so on.

Some authors trace the semantic unspecificity of (1)–(3) to the already familiar phenomenon of *indexicality* broadly construed, i.e. sensitivity of meaning to certain features, or parameters, of the context of utterance. Thus, for instance, Stanley (2000) posits a free variable in the logical form of (1), which occupies a hidden argument-place for locations in the predicate "to rain". "To rain" thus becomes a dyadic predicate *rain(t, l)*, expressing a relation between a time *t* and a location *l*. Resolving the semantic unspecificity of "It's raining" means simply filling in a covert, free slot in logical form, according to the location which is salient in context. Similarly, Szabò (2001) argues that the word "green" doesn't correspond to the monadic predicate *green(x)*, but to a two-place relation *green(c, p)*, in which *c* stands for a comparison class and *p* stands for a part in which the object is green. This way the predicate, as it occurs in "The leaves are green", is not unspecific, rather it is incomplete due to a failure to fill in the slot dedicated to the part in which the leaves in question are green. Once again, resolving semantic unspecificity becomes equivalent to resolving an instance of indexicality construed as sensitivity of content to certain features or parameters of the context of utterance.[1]

Accounts of unspecificity in terms of hidden indexicality encounter more than one difficulty. The most straightforward is the challenge arising from *overgeneration*. If the arguments of the proponent of hidden indexicality are correct, then they can plausibly be applied to more and more expressions which share the same characteristic features of "to rain", "being ready", "being Italian". This means that we may find ourselves with an unexpected amount of hidden indexicality in language. Most importantly though, the problem is that the hidden indexicality arguments seem to "work too well", to such an extent that we seem to lack a principled way of *ruling out* that further hidden argument-places may be "discovered" (see Cappelen and Lepore 2002, 2005, Hall 2008). There are also some methodological worries, pertaining to the data employed by the proponents of hidden indexicality in order to establish their theory. Since these authors aim to make an *empirical* point concerning the syntax of these expressions and yet the data they start from involve purely semantic intuitions, this way of proceeding has been indicated as methodologically flawed (see Neale 2007, Collins 2007, Pupa and Troseth 2011).

The objections just summarized are good insofar as they point to some undesirable implications for the hidden indexicality theory. Yet, they do not directly question the idea that unspecificity is indexicality. In this paper, I aim to provide a positive argument to counter the contention that unspecificity is really indexicality broadly construed. The most respectable way to achieve this result is by pointing at some properties that set unspecific and indexical expressions apart by virtue of how these expressions work within language and language use. An attempt in this direction is made by Sainsbury (2002), who explicitly challenges the hidden indexicality approach to the semantics of (1)–(3), with an argument aimed at distinguishing between unspecificity and indexicality. I find Sainsbury's argument flawed, though I sympathize with the point he wishes to make and the position he wishes

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[1] Rothschild and Segal (2009) claim to offer an indexical account alternative to that advanced by Szabò (though this is dubious: see Clapp (2012)), while Stanley and Szabò (2000) work out an account in terms of hidden indexicality of quantifier phrases like "every bottle". Finally, King and Stanley (2005) argue for a methodology that favours hidden indexicality treatments over pragmatic intrusion strategies, using comparatives ("better than") and conditionals as case-studies.

to defend—namely, that there is such a thing as semantic unspecificity, which differs from indexicality. What I set out to do in this paper is to counter Sainsbury's original argument and eventually propose a new one, aimed at supporting the same conclusion—namely that semantic unspecificity differs from indexicality. The paper is organised as follows: In section 2, I will briefly reconstruct Sainsbury's central argument that semantic unspecificity doesn't coincide with indexicality. In section 3, I will highlight some problematic aspects of the argument, which stem from an unclear use of the notion of "comprehension", which ultimately prevents the argument from fully succeeding. In section 4, I will propose a different argument which will help to trace this difference more clearly.

2. The Comprehension Argument for Unspecificity

Sainsbury's central argument supporting the claim that sentences like (1)-(3) are unspecific rather than covertly indexical is essentially based on the idea that we "understand" these sentences even if no contextual information is available to us, contrary to the prediction of the indexicalist. Consider a sentence like (3) ("Sally reads an Italian book"). Let's suppose that the linguistic expression "Italian book" is covertly indexical. In Sainsbury's words:

> On the covert indexical theory, the logical form of "Italian book" could be represented by something like "Italian R book", where the interpretation of the relation variable R is to be supplied by the context. The form "xRy" could be interpreted so as to be true of the satisfiers of y which are written in a language which satisfied x, or so as to be true of the satisfiers of y manufactured in a place which satisfied the noun from which x is formed, and so on. [...C]ontext can point to sensible interpretations of R, and can place obstacles in the way of accessing interpretations which, in other contexts, would be natural. However, unless nothing better can be found, it seems an extraordinary account as applied to this kind of case. *It implies that you would not have understood an utterance like "Let's read an Italian book together" unless you had identified such an R; whereas in fact it seems you do understand even when you are in doubt about R.* You may go on to ask "Do you mean a book in Italian or a book about Italy?", but this no more shows that you did not understand the first remark than if, in response to "Let's go to the movies" you say "Do you mean let's go tonight or later?". In both cases, the proposal was fully intelligible but not fully specific. (Sainsbury 2002, 197-198, my emphasis)

Sainsbury's argument could be thus summarized: if "Italian book" were covertly indexical, thus having a logical form like "Italian R book", then the hearer who listened to an utterance of (3) would not understand it unless she had identified the right R. But, Sainsbury notes, hearers usually do understand uses of "Italian book" even if they are uncertain of what R is. So, expressions like "Italian book" are not indexical: they are just unspecific.

The comprehension argument introduces a distinction on which Sainsbury puts much stress in the subsequent lines. The distinction is between what the sentence may be taken to mean (its "reading"), as opposed to "what makes it true". As he states:

> It seems to me hard to deny (a) that we should distinguish different "readings" of a sentence from different ways in which it could be made true and (b) that this distinction has not always been scrupulously adhered to. (199)

This separation between "readings" and—let's say—"truth-conferring aspects" is essential to his notion of unspecificity. Unspecific expressions all have determinate, fully intelligible readings, i.e. they can be the object of comprehension. At the same time, they suffer from a lack of determinacy as to what in the world "makes them true or false". They are, so to speak, determinate in their "internalistic", psychologically relevant semantic aspects, while they are indeterminate as to their "externalistic" world-related semantic properties.

The comprehension argument plays a key role in Sainsbury's whole strategy. My aim in the following section will be to assess the claim that we have "comprehension" of uses of linguistic expressions like "Italian book" (but also "The leaves are green", "Sam cut the grass", "It's raining", and so on).

3. Assessing the Comprehension Argument

There are at least two ways of interpreting the word "comprehension" as Sainsbury uses it in the previously quoted passage. Firstly, comprehension may be equated with one's understanding of the "meaning-in-context" of a sentence, where the meaning-in-context of a sentence s results from the linguistic meaning of its non-context-sensitive components *plus* the content that context-sensitive expressions—typically, indexicals and demonstratives— acquire in the context of utterance. For instance, the meaning-in-context of an utterance of "I wear glasses" as uttered by Sally is that Sally wears glasses; the meaning-in-context of an utterance of "She is a photographer" as uttered while referring to Amy is that Amy is a photographer. The idea of meaning-in-context may be expanded once one accepts that sometimes speakers utter a sentence s which semantically expresses a proposition p, while meaning a richer (but still relevantly similar) proposition p^*. A case in point is, for instance, "I've had breakfast" (see Recanati 2004): while the sentence expresses the proposition that x has had breakfast at least once in the past, one may want to use this sentence to say something more specific (but still related to the sentence's literal meaning), perhaps that one has had breakfast *on the morning of the day of utterance*. If one accepts that the more specific proposition is still an instance of meaning-in-context (and not, to mention an alternative, an implicature), then comprehension in the first sense may include understanding of this kind of content as well.

If comprehension is understanding of (broadly construed) meaning-in-context, then it seems clear to me that there can be no comprehension in the sort of cases Sainsbury asks the reader to consider. Imagine we heard an utterance of "Let's read an Italian book" and were not sure of what relation counts for the book to be Italian. To the extent that the hearer has no access to this background information, she is in no position to understand the (broadly construed) meaning-in-context of the sentence—perhaps that the speaker and her audience should read a book *written in* Italian. For the comprehension argument to work, the notion of comprehension should not be understood as comprehension of meaning-in-context, whether in a restricted or broad sense of the term.

The second way in which "comprehension" could be understood is as *linguistic* comprehension, which may be characterised as knowledge of what a sentence means only in virtue of one's linguistic competence. This kind of comprehension is acquired by consulting one's own semantic competence or knowledge, in a context-independent fashion.

If comprehension is equated with linguistic comprehension, it seems clear to me that the proponents of hidden indexicals as well can claim that we have linguistic comprehension of expressions like "Italian book" in the same way that we have linguistic comprehension of words like "I", "today", "now". These expressions do after all have a linguistic meaning, which Kaplan (1989) called "character": the character of "I" may be captured as "the speaker in context", the character of "today" may be captured as "the day of utterance", and so on. The character of "Italian book" may well be "book which is Italian in a contextually relevant way". If the indexicalist is willing to accept this as the character of "Italian book", then there's no reason why she should predict, as Sainsbury maintains, that the hearer will not understand those words unless she identifies the contextually relevant relation that counts for the book to be Italian.

To sum up: either we interpret comprehension as an understanding of meaning-in-context broadly construed, in which case there is no comprehension in the cases relevant to Sainsbury's argument (since, by assumption, hearers have no access to relevant background information); or we interpret comprehension as linguistic comprehension, in which case indexicalists have no reason to predict that there will be no comprehension in the cases cited, contrary to what Sainsbury maintains. Either way, the comprehension argument seems to have problems. In the first case, the argument fails because the contention that language users understand the expressions at issue is false. In the second case, the argument may not fail if considered on its own: after all, hearers *do* seem to have linguistic comprehension of expressions like "Italian book". Yet they *do* have linguistic comprehension of indexicals as well, if we accept that indexicals have a linguistic meaning, or character. So, there is no difference between unspecificity and indexicality when it comes to this kind of comprehension.

4. Indexicality and Unspecificity: an Argument from (Modal) Embeddings

In this section, I would like to propose a way to clearly discriminate between unspecificity and indexicality.[2] The distinction I am about to make presupposes a *two-dimensional* semantics (see Kaplan 1989), in which sentences express propositions that are true at a context and a circumstance of evaluation. A context is a set of parameters which fix the

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[2]   The present proposal is in the same spirit as a number of remarks already set forth in the literature, mainly purported to show that the hidden indexicality strategy is misguided because alleged hidden indexicals fail to bear enough similarities to overt indexicals: for instance, Neale (2007) argues that hidden indexicals, unlike overt ones, express no perspective (for example, as to spatial and temporal distance, subjective or objective stance etc.); Cappelen and Lepore (2002) contend that hidden indexicals fail to enter in anaphoric relations and fail to give rise to a priori truths; Recanati (2010) notes that purported hidden indexicals have indefinite readings (e.g. the supposed hidden indexical in "It's raining" can receive an indefinite reading as in "It's raining *somewhere*") while overt indexicals trigger no such readings.

semantic value of context-sensitive expressions like "I", "here", "now", "she", "this". A circumstance of evaluation is a set of coordinates which serve for evaluation: typically, the index of the circumstances of evaluation contains possible worlds, but it may also include time and location coordinates, as well as coordinates on standards of precision, depending on the operators one is willing to admit into the language. In such a framework, a sentence *s* expresses a proposition *p* which is true at a context *c* and at a circumstance of evaluation *i* if *p* is true at i_c, i.e. at the circumstance of evaluation of the context (for instance, the possible world in which the utterance is performed).

The difference I will outline has to do with how the content of indexicals, as opposed to that of semantically unspecific expressions, is fixed when these expressions are embedded in intensional contexts, and in particular in modal contexts (operators like "It is possible that", "It could be the case that" and so on).

Let us start with indexicals. A characteristic feature of indexical expressions—especially of those described as "pure"—is that once their referent is fixed in a context, it is fixed for all circumstances of evaluation. As Kaplan states:

> When what was said in using a pure indexical in a context *c* is to be evaluated with respect to an arbitrary circumstance, the relevant object is always the referent of the indexical with respect to the context *c*. (Kaplan 1989, 500)[3]

It follows that, when an occurrence of "I" is embedded into a modal operator, whose role is characteristically that of "shifting" the world of evaluation for the embedded sentence, the referent of "I" doesn't switch as the circumstance of evaluation switches, since it is "rigidly" fixed at the context of utterance, as in:

(4) It is possible that I don't wear glasses.

The sentence expresses a proposition which is true iff there is at least one world w_i accessible from the actual world $w_@$ in which the *actual* speaker in context, *a*, doesn't wear glasses. Note that the referent of "I" is fixed, at the context of utterance, in such a way that that particular occurrence of "I" refers to *a* and such referent is fixed for all circumstances of evaluation.[4] This implies that, once the referent of that occurrence of "I" has been fixed in context, for every circumstance at which the embedded sentence may happen to be evaluated, one cannot reasonably find it indeterminate whether the expression has a reference or not—for, one would expect, either *a* exists in that circumstance (conceived as a possible world *w*), or she doesn't.[5]

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3   See also Maier 2009, who defends the same Kaplanian claim.

4   With appropriate changes, the point seems to hold even for those theories that oppose the Kaplanian account in regarding indexicals as behaving like "monsters", that is as having their reference fixed also in contexts different from the context of utterance (see among others Nunberg (1993), Predelli (1998a, b), Schlenker (2003), Santorio (2010), Mount (2008), Parsons (2011), Rabern (2013)). These theorists could say that once the reference of "I" is fixed, *in the context of utterance or in any other relevant context*, its reference is fixed for all circumstances of evaluation.

5   With suitable modifications, I take it that this claim could be endorsed even by somebody who believes in counterparts. One could substitute "either *a* exists in that circumstance (conceived

To be completely fair, there could be circumstances in which it is not clear whether the actual speaker exists or not—maybe her body exists, but her brain has been transplanted into somebody else's skull; or maybe she exists, but she has a double personality and it is not clear which personality "I" refers to, and so on. In all these scenarios it would be unclear whether the counterfactual individual is identical to the actual speaker, however this could not be blamed on an indeterminacy of the referent of that particular occurrence of "I" in that particular context, since who the referent is in the context of utterance could be taken as clear (at least in ordinary cases); the indeterminacy is due, rather, to the obtaining of conditions that render it difficult to tell whether the individual in the imagined counterfactual scenario is the same as the individual who is actually doing the speaking. So I suggest that, even though indeterminacy could arise concerning the reference of "I", this would *not* be due to any indeterminacy at the semantic level, but to an indeterminacy that concerns a *metaphysical* question, namely whether a certain individual is identical to another individual.

This being said, the feature of "I" illustrated a few paragraphs above suggests the following thought: when the content of an indexical is assigned in a certain context c, e.g., when the referent of "I" in c is fixed as being identical to a, the content of the expression is fixed with respect to *all* circumstances of evaluation. This means that, once the required contextual information has been provided, no residual question need be asked as to what the referent of that occurrence of "I" is, for the referent will be identical with a in all worlds in which a exists (metaphysical issues aside).

Unspecific expressions, like "Italian book", seem to behave differently. Imagine Sally is reading a book which is written in English, but since she is bilingual, she could just as easily read a book which is written in Italian. She therefore utters the sentence:

(5) It is possible that I read an Italian book.

The sentence contains the unspecific expression "Italian book". With the help of background information as to what Sally means by "Italian book"—namely, a book written in Italian in a normal way—the unspecificity of the expression may be taken to have been resolved in the context of utterance: "Italian book" in Sally's mouth means "book written in Italian in a normal way". After the expression's unspecificity has been dealt with, we may be tempted to say that the utterance expresses the content that there is at least one world w_i accessible from the actual world $w_@$ in which Sally reads a book which is written in Italian in a normal way (and is true iff there is at last one world w_i accessible from the actual world $w_@$ in which Sally reads a book which is written in Italian in a normal way).

Yet, despite this completion, it is perfectly possible for (5) to be true even if circumstances different from the circumstances of the context of utterance obtain. The point deserves to be developed in more detail. To see it more clearly, first consider the simple sentence

as a possible world w), or she doesn't" with "either *a's counterpart* exists in that circumstance (conceived as a possible world w), or she doesn't". In this paper, though, I will assume a Kripkean take on modality.

(6) I read an Italian book.

Suppose that, in the context of utterance *c*, "Italian book" is to be understood as "book written in Italian in a normal way", in such a way that the expression's unspecificity is (presumably sufficiently) resolved in *c*. An utterance of this sentence may be true in a circumstance of evaluation *k1*, where the speaker reads a book which is written in Italian in the usual way—with words and sentences all in their place. However, it seems clear that the same expression "Italian book" could have been used in a different (counterfactual) context, to mean that the book in question is, for instance, written in Italian, but with a Cyrillic script. And in yet another (counterfactual) context, the expression "Italian book" could have been used to mean that the book in question has been bought in Italy.

The next step in the argument builds on the latter result and brings intentional operators into play, such as "It is possible that", "It could be the case that". These operators, as Kaplan (1989) and Lewis (1980) conceive them, combine with sentences in order to form more complex sentences; their role is to shift the circumstances of evaluation at which the sentence is to be assessed for truth or falsity.

Once we introduce intensional operators, we see that the way the expression "Italian book" is completed in the context of utterance need not affect the truth-conditions of the modal sentence. Consider the sentence:

(5) It is possible that I read an Italian book.

All that is required for this sentence to be true is that there is a world w_i accessible from the actual world $w_@$, where the speaker reads an Italian book, but note that the content of the words "Italian book" could be satisfied by different things from one circumstance of evaluation to another. The fact that, in the context of utterance, "Italian book" is used to mean "book written in Italian in the normal way" seems irrelevant for the purposes of evaluating an utterance of (5). So, for instance, (5) would be true even if there were a circumstance w_2 where "Italian book" is used to mean "written in Italian with a Cyrillic alphabet"; or if there were a circumstance w_3 where "Italian book" is used to mean "bought in Italy".

In order to see this, we may imagine a scenario in which the relevant interpretation of "Italian book" in the context of utterance is "book written in Italian in the normal way". Suppose Sally only reads the Cyrillic alphabet and, as a consequence, she cannot read Italian, because it is written in Latin alphabet. She utters: "I have never read an Italian book". Here we may suppose that the relevant interpretation of "Italian book" is such that the expression indicates books written in Italian in the normal way – obviously, with Latin alphabet. Even though this is the salient interpretation, Sally could go on and utter: "Though I *could* read an Italian book, if the words in it were Italian, but they were written in Cyrillic alphabet". As we can see, once the sentence "I read an Italian book" is embedded into a modal "could" (which I will consider as equivalent to operators like "It is possible that", "Possibly"), the contextually salient interpretation of "Italian book" has no role in fixing the truth-conditions in the modal sentence, which is true as long as there is a possible world w_i accessible from the

world of the utterance $w_@$ where Sally reads a book which is Italian *in some way*. Indeed, the way in which the book is Italian in the possible world w_i accessible from $w_@$ could even be different from "being written in Italian"; it could be "bought in Italy". To see this, imagine that Sally opens a book written in Italian and utters "I cannot read this Italian book". Here the salient interpretation is once again "written in Italian in the normal way". This interpretation need not affect "Italian book" when embedded in a modal context, since Sally could go on and say: "But I *could* read an Italian book, were it a book in Cyrillic bought in Italy". Here we see that the contextually salient interpretation of "Italian book" has definitely no bearing on the occurrence of the expression in the modal context, and on the truth-conditions of the sentence.

A contrast then emerges: on the one hand, when an indexical occurs in a modal embedding, once the content of that indexical is fixed in a context of utterance, it is fixed for all circumstances of evaluation. On the other hand, when an unspecific expression occurs in a modal embedding, even though the content of that semantically unspecific expression is fixed in the context of utterance, this content is not fixed for all circumstances of evaluation. To see this, it is enough to look at the truth-conditions of modal sentences that contain an occurrence of semantically unspecific expressions like "Italian book". These sentences could be true even with respect to circumstances of evaluation where the words "Italian book" describe something which doesn't satisfy the contextually salient interpretation.

A referee suggests that this contrast is ultimately due to the fact that indexicals are directly referential, while semantically unspecific expressions are not; this would imply that reference-fixing for a term like "I", which—at least according to the standard Kaplanian account—is tantamount to providing the value for a contextual parameter in a non-mediated way,[6] guarantees that the content that the indexical acquires in that context is the same for all circumstances of evaluation, while the way the content of an unspecific expression is fixed in context doesn't seem to give rise to the same guarantee. I take this contrast to be helpful in achieving a neat distinction between indexicality and semantic unspecificity.

A second example is worth analysing, which highlights further the contrast between indexicality and unspecificity. Consider a sentence like "It's raining" as opposed to "It's raining here". If one embeds the latter sentence within a modal operator like "possibly", thus obtaining

(7) Possibly, it's raining here

it's clear that the reference of "here" remains fixed at the location of utterance despite the

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6   One could disagree with the idea that indexicals are directly referential: For example, one may maintain that the reference of "I" is fixed through a definite description (Frege 1918/56, Searle 1983, Castañeda 1974, Loar 1976, Brinck 1997). This would of course drastically change the modal profile of sentences containing "I". I won't discuss descriptivism on the semantics of indexicals here and I will confine myself to assuming referentialism. Suffice it to say that I find it extremely difficult, at the level of linguistic intuition, to force a reading in which the reference of "I" is fixed by a definite description. In a sentence like the following, it's *very hard* to interpret the "I" as referring to Ralph: "Since we could be in a situation in which the person who is talking right now is Ralph, in that situation I could be talking right now".

fact that the circumstance of evaluation is shifted by the operator. If one is in Paris and utters (7), clearly the utterance is true iff there is a world w_i accessible from $w_@$ where it's raining *in Paris*. By contrast, if one embeds "It's raining" in a modal context, thus obtaining

(8) Possibly, it's raining

whether the location of utterance is Paris does not matter much. If Paris were salient in context, the uttered sentence could be interpreted as true if there were at least one world w_i accessible from $w_@$ where it rains in Paris. However, note that even if this were the salient interpretation, the utterance could still be true even in a world where it rains in London. This is testified by the following example. Suppose one utters "It's not raining here" in Paris, where in fact it's not raining; as a consequence of this, Paris is supposed to be particularly salient in the conversation. Still, it's perfectly appropriate to utter:

(9) It's not raining here [*Paris*]. But it could be raining, were we in London.

In the first sentence of (9), Paris is made highly salient by virtue of its being the location referred to by "here". Yet it is perfectly possible to interpret the second sentence in (9) as if the salient location were London. The fact that Paris is the place of utterance and is as a result particularly salient doesn't constrain the implicit reference to a location as being identical to the location of utterance. This phenomenon contrasts with how "here" would behave in a similar modal embedding. It would be infelicitous to say: "But it could be raining here, were we in London". In this case, the reference of "here" *has* to be the place of utterance (Paris), and it's very hard to extract a reading in which "here" refers to London. The fact that indexicals like "here" are directly referential fixes their reference in a much more "rigid" way than the way in which implicit reference to a place in an unspecific sentence like "It's raining" could be fixed.

To sum up: drawing from the argument just developed, indexicals appear as expressions such that, in modal embeddings, whenever their content is fixed in a context of utterance, it is fixed for all circumstances of evaluation. By contrast, unspecific expressions in modal embeddings are such that, even if their unspecificity is dealt with in a context of utterance, this contextual completion doesn't determine a content which remains the same in all circumstances of evaluation, as one can see by looking at the truth-conditions of modal sentences like (5), (8) or (9).

The role of *modal embeddings* is key in the argument, even though some might feel that the argument could be run without involving intensional contexts. It is only in such embeddings that we can fully appreciate the contrast between, for instance, the indexical "I" and the unspecific "Italian book". In "It is possible that I don't wear glasses", if the referent of "I" in context is Carl, whatever world w_i we consider, it will have to be Carl again. While in "It is possible that I read an Italian book", even though by "Italian book" the speaker means a book written in Italian in the normal way, the modal sentence will be true even in a world w_i where the speaker reads a book which is written in Italian but in a Cyrillic script, or in a world w_j in which the speaker reads a book which has been bought in Italy. The fact

that "Italian book" means "book written in Italian in the normal way" in the context of utterance doesn't seem relevant for the truth-conditions of the modal sentence. Similarly, it is only in modal embeddings that we can appreciate the difference between "It's raining" and "It's raining here"; in "Possibly, it's raining here", if the reference of "here" in the actual world is Paris, it has to be Paris in any other world w_i we would consider. In "Possibly, it's raining", even though the place of utterance is Paris and Paris is salient in conversation, the utterance could be true even in a world w_i where it rains in London.

One could object that the same phenomenon that I have associated with unspecificity also affects indexicals. Let us focus on so-called "pure" or "automatic" indexicals (Kaplan 1989, Barwise and Perry 1983, Perry 2001). One could object that expressions like "here", "now", "today", "tomorrow" might be such that, even if their content has been fixed in context, this is not, strictly speaking, fixed for all circumstances of evaluation. Let's suppose that the referent of "here" in "It is possible that it rains here" is fixed in context *c* as being identical to Paris. This doesn't prevent that an utterance of the modal sentence be true if there is a world w_i where it's not strictly speaking raining in Paris, but in the suburbs of Paris, or in a region that includes Paris but it's larger than its municipality area. This may seem to challenge the idea that, once the content of an indexical is fixed in a context of utterance, it is fixed for all circumstances of evaluation.

I do not believe this objection poses a serious threat to the strategy I employ. As already suggested with respect to "I", the mechanism of indexicality is *designed* in such a way that fixing the content for an indexical leaves no open question as to what its reference is across circumstances of evaluation. It is another matter whether, in some alternative situation, a certain counterfactual object or individual or space region would count as *the same* as the one actually referred to. This is a metaphysical problem. In the case just described of "here", although Paris (and, say, *only* the Paris city area) has been assigned as the reference of "here" in the context of utterance, one could allow a certain amount of flexibility and admit that Paris' suburbs, or a region larger than Paris' municipal area could *count as identical* across possible worlds (for current purposes) to the area actually referred to by that occurrence of "here". The same goes for other indexicals, like "now", "today", "tomorrow" and so on: the mechanism to which they respond is designed to fix their content across circumstances of evaluation; it is another matter whether we may be willing to count certain individuals, objects, space-regions or time-regions as the same as those actually referred to.

To conclude, the contrast that emerges between indexical and unspecific expressions as observed in modal embeddings is the following: on the one hand, when the content of an indexical is fixed in a context, it is fixed for all counterfactual circumstances of evaluation; on the other hand, when the content of an unspecific expression is fixed in a context, the expression's content is not fixed for all circumstances of evaluation. The argument just presented manages to draw attention on a clear difference between indexicality and unspecificity, a difference that can be brought to light once one looks at how these expressions behave in contexts such as modal embeddings, and could be traced to the fact that indexicals are directly referential, while unspecific expressions are not. In this respect, the argument I have presented does better than that proposed by Sainsbury, in that it contributes to a more accurate and sharp appreciation of the difference between unspecificity and indexicality.

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