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Kaplan's Three Monsters

David Kaplan's discussion of monsters is confined to section VII of *Demonstratives* (Kaplan 1977: 510-2). The main thesis of that section, namely that monsters do not occur in English and 'could not be added to it', has notoriously proved contentious.¹ Still, this controversy has proceeded in apparent ignorance of the fact that Kaplan fails to provide a *univocal* definition of a monsters, and vacillates between at least three non-equivalent alternatives. The aim of this note is that of disentangling Kaplan's equivocation. After a brief summary of Kaplan's framework and notation in section one, I discuss monsters as 'context shifters' in section two, as 'global shifters' in section three, and as 'character shifters' in section three.

1. Preliminaries

Kaplan's *Demonstratives* promotes (probably the best known version of) a two-dimensional semantics. In this framework, an expression e is assigned a semantic value (when e is a sentence, a truth-value) with respect to both a context and a circumstance of evaluation (for Kaplan, a pair consisting of a possible world and a time. In a customary notation (*modulo* the avoidance of subscripts for legibility's sake), the semantic value of e with respect to a context c and a circumstance $\langle w, t \rangle$ is $[[e]](c, w, t)$.²

The fundamental semantic role for c is revealed by the interpretive clauses for *indexical expressions*, and at least one of the semantic roles for $\langle w, t \rangle$ is highlighted by the clauses for *intensional operators*, as in, respectively:

- (1) $[[I]](c, w, t) = c_a$
 $[[\text{never } P]](c, w, t) = T$ iff $[[P]](c, w, t^*) = T$ for no t^*

where c_a is the speaker ('agent') of c (Kaplan 1977: 545-6). Both parameters are at work in the case of *intensional indexical operators*, such as N ('now') and A ('actually'):

- (2) $[[\text{now } P]](c, w, t) = T$ iff $[[P]](c, w, c_t)$
 $[[\text{actually } P]](c, w, t) = T$ iff $[[P]](c, c_w, t)$

where c_w and c_t are the world and time of c (Kaplan 1977: 545).

Kaplan's doubly indexed compositional framework is flanked by a singly indexed notion of truth-at-a-context, defined as follows:

- (3) $\text{true}_c(s)$ iff $[[s]](c, c_w, c_t)$

(Kaplan 1977: 547). This notion is in turn employed in the definition of 'validity': s is valid iff $\text{true}_c(s)$ for all c (and all model-theoretic 'structures', Kaplan 1977: 547).

¹ See for instance Anand and Nevins 2004, Dever 2004, Israel and Perry 1996, Maier 2007, Predelli 2008, Rabern 2013, Recanati 2001, Santorio 2010, and Schlenker 2003.

² Mention of assignments of values to variables, and of model-relativisation hereinafter omitted for legibility's sake.

2. Context Shifters

Towards the end of section VII, Kaplan writes:

I have gone on at perhaps excessive length about monsters because they have recently been begat by elegance. In a specific application of the theory of indexicals ... instead of having a *logic of contexts and circumstances* we have simply a *two-dimensional logic of indexed sets*. This ... permits a simple and elegant introduction of many operators which are monsters. (Kaplan 1977: 511-2)

Intuitively, the idea seems to be that monsters are to be explained on the model of intensional operators, *modulo* the substitution of context-sensitivity with circumstance-sensitivity. So, just as the intensional operator 'never' could be defined by means of clauses that effect a change in the circumstance of evaluation (see (1) above), a monstrous 'never' could be introduced as in

(4) $[[\textit{never P}]](c,w,t) = T$ iff $[[P]](k,w,t) = T$ for no k just like c except at most for k_t .

That this may be what Kaplan has in mind when writing the passage quoted above is confirmed by what he earlier quotes as an alleged counter-example to his thesis that English does not contain monsters, namely

(5) never put off until tomorrow what you can do today.³

Here, the intuitively correct outcomes could be obtained on the basis of a monster-friendly treatment by interpreting 'never' as '*never*' in (4), thereby deriving the result that, for any day d , it is inadvisable (in the actual world) to put off until the day following d what one can do at d .⁴

I refer to this notion of a monster as a *context shifter*. As the name indicates, context shifters affect only the context-parameter, and are thus idle with respect to expression that fail to be context-sensitive, i.e., with respect to non-indexical expressions. (For instance, by definition (3), '*never P*' is true_c iff $[[\textit{never P}]](c,c_w,c_t) = T$. According to the clause for '*never*', this is so iff $[[P]](k,c_w,c_t) = T$, for k as in (4). But if P is non indexical, $[[P]](c,w,t) = [[P]](c^*,w,t)$ for all c and c^* . Thus, $[[P]](k,c_w,c_t) = T$ iff $[[P]](c,c_w,c_t) = T$, i.e., by definition (3), iff $\text{true}_c(P)$).

3. Monsters as Global Shifters

In a passage towards the beginning of section VII, Kaplan defines a monster as an operator

... which when prefixed to a sentence yields a truth if and only if in some context the contained sentence ... expresses a content that is true in the circumstances of that context (Kaplan 1977: 510).⁵

According to (3) and to Kaplan's definition of 'content' (in the sense relevant for his 'Formal System', Kaplan 1977: 547), if a sentence s 'in' a context c expresses a content that is true with respect to c_w and c_t , then $\text{true}_c(s)$. Hence, according to

³ Kaplan 1977: 510, footnote 34. The example is attributed to Richmond Thomason.

⁴ Given the obvious assumption that the character for 'today' selects the day containing the time of speaking, and that the character for 'tomorrow' picks out the following day (and tacitly transforming (5) into a declarative sentence for simplicity's sake).

⁵ Thanks to Roberto Loss for calling my attention to this passage.

this definition, a monstrous counterpart to, say, English ‘never’ would be definable along the lines of

(6) $\text{true}_c(\mathbf{never}(s))$ iff $\text{true}_k(s)$ for no k just like c at most for k_t .

I refer to monsters in this sense of the term as *global shifters*.

Obviously, the context shifter ‘never’ from section two and the newly introduced global shifter ‘never’ are not on a par, as testified by the fact that ‘never’ is by no means idle when applied to context-insensitive expressions. So, unlike ‘never(P)’, ‘never(P)’ is not at all equivalent to P, even if P is non-indexical. Similarly, incidentally,

(7) **never** put off until tomorrow what you can do today

is a stronger claim than that presumably put forth by (5), this time a claim to the effect that procrastination is ill advised in every possible world.

Note on the other hand that global shifters fail to affect any sentence which is not only non-indexical but also *perfect* (in Kaplan’s sense, Kaplan 1977: 503). This is unsurprising, since the evaluation of non-indexical perfect sentences remains utterly oblivious to the peculiarities of either index—*a fortiori*, to the sort of index-shifting engendered by globally shifting monsters.

4. Character Shifters

The passage quoted at the beginning of section three is preceded by a sentence calling the reader’s attention to ‘operators which attempt to operate on character’ (Kaplan 1977: 510). According to Kaplan, the *character* $\{e\}$ of an expression e is a function which, given a context c , yields the *content* $\{e\}(c)$, in turn understood as a function which, given a circumstance $\langle w, t \rangle$, yields the semantic value $[[e]](c, w, t)$ (Kaplan 1977: 546-8). As graphically highlighted by the lack of arguments for $\{e\}$, character is a primitive semantic property of an expression, a fact that justifies Kaplan to speak of character as the formal counterpart of ‘meaning’.

Since character is semantically primitive, the idea of (non-trivial) operators on character informally provoke a sort of ‘meaning change’, one unobjectionably expressible in English only with the appeal of pure quotation. (Note in this respect Kaplan’s parenthetical qualification of his ban on monsters: ‘I claim that [none] can be expressed in English (without sneaking in a quotation device)’, Kaplan 1979: 511). In this sense, since *all* expressions are endowed of a character (in the case of non-indexical expressions, a constant character), monsters as *character shifters* may engender non-trivial effects on *any* sentence. In particular, in contrast with both context shifters and global shifters, character shifters may dramatically impact also on sentences that are both non-indexical and perfect. Indeed, they result in what is sometimes called a ‘language change’, as in a hypothetical understanding of

(8) if ‘leg’ meant what ‘tail’ means, how many legs would a horse have?
that would warrant ‘one’ as the correct answer.⁶

⁶ Since the antecedent in the English sentence (8) is not a monster, the actually correct answer is obviously four (see Thomasson 1975).

Conclusion

A variety of phenomena have been alleged to present counterexamples to Kaplan's thesis that monsters do not play a role in natural language semantics—attitude predicates (Schlenker 2003), fictional prefixes (Predelli 2008), and issues in the vicinity of quotation (Recanati 2001) being cases in point. Yet, Schlenker's indirect reports involve context-shifters, Predelli's prefixes fairly explicitly behave as global-shifters, and Recanati's considerations are arguably committed to the existence of operators on character. Awareness of the distinctions between Kaplan's definitions of 'monster' is an obvious pre-requisite for the analysis of the sense in which this or that proposal contradicts Kaplan's *dictum*, and for the development of a general assessment of the role of monsters in language.

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