

Entry title: **The Essential Indexical**  
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*Abstract*

Many writers take indexicals such as ‘I’, ‘here’ and ‘now’ to be irreducible to other modes of reference and essential to our thinking. Perry (1979) argues that the beliefs expressed by sentences containing indexicals cannot be understood on the traditional Fregean account of belief. ‘Quasi-indicators’ must be used to attribute a use of an essential indexical to someone from a third-person perspective.

*Main text*

Indexicals are linguistic expressions such as ‘I’, ‘here’, and ‘now’ whose reference varies depending upon the context in which they are used. Many writers including Castañeda (1966, 1967, 1968), Perry (1979), and Chisholm (1981), have argued that indexicals are irreducible to other modes of reference such as names and definite descriptions. ‘I’ in my statement, “I am hungry”, e.g., cannot be replaced with the co-referring expression, ‘Komarine’ without the loss of cognitive impact since I may believe that Komarine is hungry without realising that Komarine is me. The same applies to uses of ‘here’ and ‘now’. It is also claimed that the thoughts expressed using indexicals have a privileged role. The central insight is perhaps best appreciated if we consider Perry’s claim that indexicals are essential for characterising beliefs that motivate action. I may see myself in a mirror and notice that the person I see reflected has dirt on her face, but unless I believe that *I* have a dirty face I will not wipe it. I may believe that the meeting starts at noon but will not be moved to act unless I believe that the meeting starts *now*. I may believe that the treasure is buried outside the old church, but I will not start digging unless I believe that the treasure is buried *here*. To act requires me to have beliefs about my surrounding environment and how I am situated with respect to it. Indexical beliefs provide for this because their content is essentially perspectival. It is this egocentric dimension which is lost if the indexical is replaced with a non-indexical term, which is why indexical expressions cannot be reduced to other modes of reference.

Perry (1979) famously argued that indexicals pose a problem for the traditional Fregean account of belief. According to this theory, beliefs are relations between subjects and propositions. The belief report, “Komarine believes that Fido is a dog”, states that an individual – Komarine – stands in the relation of believing to the proposition “Fido is a dog”. The problem arises because the Fregean view implies (i) propositions are held to be true or false timelessly – not only true or false at a particular time, in a particular place, expressed by a particular person, and (ii) propositions are not individuated only by their truth-value, but also by something like the conceptual components of the proposition which affect its cognitive impact. The propositions, “Hesperus is Venus” and “Phosphorus is Venus” have the same truth-value, but they are nevertheless different propositions since they are composed of different concepts. It is easy to see why indexicals pose a problem given (i) and (ii). A sentence such as “I am hungry” does not pick out a proposition since its truth-value varies from context to context, but as we saw above, there is no way of rendering “I

am hungry” as a proposition which is timelessly true or false without losing its cognitive impact. Various solutions to the problem have been proposed. Some attempt to refine the traditional account of belief, whilst others reject it completely in favour of a theory which can deal with the problem.

We sometimes attribute a use of an essential indexical to someone else from a third-person perspective. By uttering, “Sue thinks that she is going to be late for work”, I may attribute the thought, “I am going to be late for work” to Sue. Similarly, my utterance “Richard is in Malaga; he says it is hot there”, may attribute the thought “It is hot here” to Richard. If Teresa thinks at 12 o’clock, “It is now time to go to the meeting” I can attribute this thought to her by uttering “Teresa thought at 12 o’clock that it was then time to go to the meeting”. Castañeda (1966, 1967, 1968) represents uses of he, she, it, there, and then which are used to attribute a use of an essential indexical to someone else with he\*, she\*, it\*, etc. Mechanisms which enable us to attribute uses of essential indexicals from a third-person perspective are called ‘quasi-indicators’.

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#### *Key words*

Egocentricity/Essential indexical/Quasi-indicator

#### *Other relevant entries*

Immunity to Error Through Misidentification

Indexicality

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