



The irrelevance of intentions to refer: demonstratives and demonstrations

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Abstract According to Mario Gómez-Torrente in *Roads to Reference*, the reference of a demonstrative is fixed in an object by the speaker's referential intentions (IRH). I argue that this is a mistake. First, I draw attention to a venerable alternative theory that Gómez-Torrente surprisingly overlooks: the reference is fixed in an object directly by a relation established in perceiving the object. Next I criticize IRH, arguing that it is implausible, redundant, and misleading. Finally, I present a theory of *demonstrations* that is like the alternative theory for demonstratives. For, though demonstrations do not determine the reference of demonstratives, they play an independent referential role which is important in explaining David Kaplan's famous Carnap-Agnew example and many others including some of Gómez-Torrente's.

1 Introduction

Mario Gómez-Torrente's impressively careful and thorough *Roads to Reference* (2019)¹ gives a central explanatory role to *intentions to refer*. I shall argue that this is a mistake, using demonstratives and demonstrations as my examples.

Gómez-Torrente claims:

It seems safe to say that the vast majority of theorists of demonstratives nowadays accept that referential intentions must play a key role in a correct theory of the determination of reference for demonstratives. (27–28)

¹ All citations of Gómez-Torrente are to this work.

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Jeff Speaks, whose work on demonstratives looms large in Gómez-Torrente's discussion, claims that

if there is any adequate internalizable theory of character for demonstratives to be had, it will be a theory which explains the contents of demonstratives in contexts partly in terms of the intentions of the speaker of the context. (2017, 714–715)

In contrast, I recently argued that the intending-to-refer hypothesis (IRH) for “singular referring terms” is “(1) implausible; (2) incomplete; (3) redundant once completed; (4) misleading” (2020, 13). Indeed, intending to refer “should have no place at all in a theory of language” (9).

One reason that Speaks and Gómez-Torrente give such weight to IRH is their dim view of alternatives. Speaks thinks that there are just two, “Demonstration theories” and “Salience theories” (716), and finds both wanting (716–718). Gómez-Torrente, in effect, agrees (24–34). Speaks concludes his discussion of alternatives: “Perhaps there are other theoretical alternatives we have not considered—but it's not easy for me to see what they would be” (2017, 719).

Now, I certainly agree that the two alternative theories mentioned are failures: I have argued that neither demonstrations (2004, 290–291) nor salience (2013, 294 n.12) have any role in explaining the reference of demonstratives. But there is another alternative theory. It is surprising, and disappointing, that Speaks and Gómez-Torrente overlook it.

I shall introduce the overlooked alternative in the next section. In Sect. 3, I shall criticize IRH. In Sect. 4, I shall present a theory of *demonstrations*. For, though demonstrations do not determine the reference of demonstratives, they play an independent referential role which is important in explaining David Kaplan's famous Carnap-Agnew example and many others including some of Gómez-Torrente's.

First some clarifications. (a) As Gómez-Torrente remarks (20–21), what goes for the demonstratives ‘this’ and ‘that’ pretty much goes for the pronouns ‘he’, ‘she’, and ‘it’; and, I would add, for complex demonstratives. (b) As he also remarks (20 n. 2), demonstratives have uses as bound variables and as anaphoric devices. We are not concerned with these but with deictic referential uses. (c) There are also attributive uses (Hawthorne & Manley, 2012; Jeshion, 2010; King, 2001), though they are rather rare. I shall not be concerned with those uses either.

2 A causal-perceptual theory of demonstratives

The surprisingly overlooked alternative is a venerable view going back at least to Husserl.² It is the view that the reference of demonstratives is fixed in objects, at least partly, by the direct perception of the objects. That view is tied to the idea that the reference determination of “singular”, “*de re*”, “object-dependent” *thoughts* is

² Hanna (1993) is a helpful discussion of Husserl, relating his views to contemporary discussions.

by such direct relations to the world. For, demonstratives express the singularity of such thoughts. The view, under the guise of “acquaintance” theory, is a main target in a comprehensive study of reference by John Hawthorne and David Manley, *The Reference Book* (2012). A paper by Robin Jeshion (2010), in a volume she edited, is a detailed discussion of the view, as are other papers in that volume. McGinn, 1981 and Pendlebury, 1984 are among many other discussions. Martin Davies (1981, 97) has urged a version of the view, tentatively endorsed by Stephen Neale (1990, 18). Joseph Almog (2012) has urged it recently.³ Last but not least, Gareth Evans urges a version of the view at great length in *The Varieties of Reference* (1982). Given that Gómez-Torrente otherwise pays a lot of attention to Evans’ book, it is particularly surprising that he should overlook this alternative.

I am disappointed that the view has been overlooked because I am one of the people who has urged it. On my view, the reference of a person’s deictic referential demonstrative is fixed in the object in mind by a causal link between the person and the object when it is, or was, the focus of that person’s perception. This is what I call a “grounding”. This grounding theory of demonstratives was presented in a unified theory also covering proper names and referentially used descriptions (1974, 1981a, b, 2014, 2015).⁴

This sort of theory opposes the view that the reference of a demonstrative is fixed in an object by a description the speaker associates with the object. So it opposes standard “description theories”. But it is also opposes IRH. For, according to IRH, reference is fixed by the descriptive content of an intention. IRH is, in effect, a description theory (on which more later).

Here is a consideration against description theories of demonstratives. Description theories are “essentially incomplete” (Devitt & Sterelny, 1999, 60): they explain the reference of one word in terms of the reference of others, leaving the reference of those others to be explained. So, *some* terms will have to be explained nondescriptively if *any* term is to refer. There is a case for supposing that some of these nondescriptive terms are *singular*. It starts from the plausible view, endorsed by many philosophers, that some *thoughts* are semantically singular. What makes a thought singular *is* that its reference is not fixed by associated descriptions of the referent but rather by some direct relation to the referent. Next, given that there are singular thoughts, there are surely some conventional ways of expressing them. The linguistic terms that conventionally do the job of expressing this singularity must themselves be semantically singular, not covered by a description theory but linked to the world in the direct manner. Demonstratives (and indexicals) are the most likely candidates to be such terms.

What could that direct relation to an object be? A plausible answer is: the causal relation established in perceiving the object.

³ Almog attributes the view to Donnellan without evidence; for discussion, see Devitt (2015, 111 n. 4.)

⁴ Devitt (2014) is a response to Hawthorne and Manley’s critique of “acquaintance”. Gómez-Torrente discusses (82–85) the updated presentation of my grounding theory of *proper names* in Devitt (2015). The update cites (114, n. 14) the earlier presentations of the grounding theory of *demonstratives*.

3 The intending-to-refer hypothesis (IRH)

Gómez-Torrente brings out nicely the intuitive appeal of IRH (5). It seems obvious that a person's use of a demonstrative, for example, refers to "what she intends to refer to". But the obviousness comes from a rather trivial and quite unexplanatory underlying truth. Referring, like walking, is an intentional act. When you walk to the station you intentionally walk to the station. Similarly, when you refer to the station you intentionally refer to the station. We get a candidate for explaining reference only when we move beyond this underlying triviality by taking statements of IRH, like those by Gómez-Torrente (29) and Speaks (2017, 715), *literally* as proposing that a person refers to *x* in virtue of *having an intention* to do so.

What is involved in *literally* having an intention to walk, or refer, to the station? Intentions, like beliefs and desires are thoughts, "propositional attitudes". And to have a thought about walking, one must have a concept of walking; similarly, referring. In light of this, apply IRH to Gómez-Torrente's evocative example (28) of two people trapped in a zoo cage with a crocodile. One of them, say Anne, remarks:

This is a pretty bad situation.

Clearly Anne is expressing a thought about the crocodile situation using 'this' to refer to the situation. According to IRH, taken literally, *Anne must have another thought about reference*, a reference-determining thought that is her intention to use 'this' to refer to the situation. *She can't refer without thinking about reference!* There is no reason to believe this, no reason to believe that any expression of a thought about something *must* be accompanied by a further metalinguistic thought about reference. That is far too intellectualized a picture of referring and is psychologically implausible.⁵ Referring is a cognitive *skill*, mere *know-how*; or so I have argued (1981a, 2006). One could refer without even *having* a concept of reference (1981a, 97).

This is not to deny that any normal adult speaker with a minimal education could probably tell you after the event what she was "talking about". That's a very easy bit of semantic knowledge. Yet even that easy bit is surely beyond the capacity of many organisms that nonetheless refer: for example, humans at the age of three⁶; bees, prairie dogs, vervet monkeys, and other species that have what cognitive ethologists call "referential" languages.⁷

⁵ Some may be tempted to clutch at the popular weasel word 'tacit' at this point. But, absent an account of what it is to *tacitly* intend to refer, this move yields no explanation.

⁶ Developmental evidence (Hakes, 1980) suggests that the capacity to have metalinguistic thoughts comes later, in middle childhood.

⁷ There is a theoretical need to distinguish much of the behavior of these organisms, including their referring behavior, from mere bodily movements; we need to distinguish what an organism *does*, in some sense, from what *just happens* to it. It is natural to say that the former behavior is *intentional*. But, according to what Michael Bratman calls "the Simple View" (1984), a behavior is intentional in virtue of having a certain intention as its immediate cause. I follow Bratman in presuming that this view is wrong. If it is not wrong, then we would need some less cognitive notion than this *intentional* to distinguish these behaviors from mere bodily movements.

That was my objection (1) to IRH: it is “implausible”. Objection (2) was that it is “incomplete”. A version of IRH is incomplete if it does not imply an account of how the allegedly reference-determining *intentions* refer. Without that, the explanatory problem has simply been moved a short distance from the reference of utterances to the reference of intentions. But we can skip this objection because the versions of IRH for demonstratives proposed by Gómez-Torrente (and many others) do imply an account of how the intentions refer.

We move to objection (3): even when IRH is complete, its positing of a referential intention is “redundant”. Gómez-Torrente assumes “that an utterer can intend to refer to an object with a demonstrative via a variety of different kinds of representations for the intended object in her intention”. One of these is a “descriptive referential intention”, an intention to refer to “the single object having a certain property” (29). Thus, in our example, Anne’s intention might be to use ‘this’ to refer to *the situation of being trapped in a zoo cage with a crocodile*. So this version of IRH is complete in that it implies that Anne’s intention refers to a situation *fitting that description*. But then *why posit this intention* to explain Anne’s reference with ‘this’? The reference of the alleged intention is determined by Anne’s association of that description with her utterance of ‘this’. So why not cut out the middle man and say simply that the reference of Anne’s “original” thought that *this is a pretty bad situation*, is determined by that association? We can then simply adopt a standard description theory of her use of ‘this’ in expressing that thought, thus concluding that ‘this’ refers to whatever fits that associated description. The positing of the additional thought, the reference-determining intention involving that description, does no explanatory work and is theoretically redundant.

Another of Gómez-Torrente’s versions of reference determination is by a speaker’s “perceptual referential intention”: this is an intention to refer to an object that is “(apparently) represented by an (apparent) perception she is having of the object” (29). Thus, in our example, the intention might be to use ‘this’ to refer to *the situation I am now perceiving*. This version has the same redundancy as the one proposing a “descriptive referential intention”. Why not forget about the intention and simply propose a description theory? ‘This’ refers to whatever fits the associated description, “the situation I am now perceiving”. This is, in fact, a theory like Stephen Schiffer’s (1978, 196). It explains the reference of ‘this’ without any appeal to a metalinguistic intention.

What we have said about these two versions of IRH proposed by Gómez-Torrente’s—he also proposes one with “memorial” referential intentions (29)—applies to other versions, including that of Speaks (2017, 715): each version, in effect, posits a redundant addition to a description theory, a metalinguistic intention involving the allegedly reference-determining description.

Objection (1) is that it is implausible that a speaker must have a metalinguistic intention in order to refer. Objection (3) is that such an intention is redundant in explaining reference.

That brings us to objection (4): IRH is “misleading”. Just how misleading is nicely shown by Gómez-Torrente’s lengthy discussion of “‘the problem of conflicting intentions’...a problem that every theory of the determination of

reference for demonstratives must deal with” (31). He goes on to argue that it is “very difficult to think of what could be the condition that by obtaining makes one referential intention override the others” (32), leading him to believe in “referential indeterminacy” (36).

The most important respect in which IRH misleads is that it entails that the reference of a demonstrative is always determined by a description that the speaker associates with the term: strip away the redundant intentions from a version of IRH and we are left with a description theory of reference. Yet, as argued in Sect. 2, it is plausible that the reference of a demonstrative is to be explained by some direct relation to the referent not by an associated description of it. Indeed, in my view, this is the most plausible of all theories of reference for all terms.

I shall illustrate this misleading respect with another of Gómez-Torrente’s examples, based on a famous one of Donnellan’s:

two people are at a party and, seeing an interesting-looking man who appears to be drinking a martini, one asks the other *Who is that (the man with the martini)?* (26)

Gómez-Torrente plausibly ascribes two referential intentions:

The utterer has both the intention to refer to the man as represented by her perception of him and the intention to refer to an object as (purportedly) represented by the description “the man with the martini.” (32, n. 15)

Stripped of the redundancy, Gómez-Torrente’s conflict is between two description theories: one where the reference is determined by “the man I am perceiving”; the other, by “the man with the martini”. Now the talk of perception in the first of these theories is reminiscent of the “direct”, nondescriptive, causal-perceptual theories mentioned in Sect. 2, including my “grounding” theory. And it is reminiscent because it is *parasitic* on such a theory. I have offered the following criticism of all such parasitic description theories of demonstratives⁸:

[They] allege that the reference of a...demonstrative is what a description associated by the speaker denotes. If so, then the referent would have to stand in the described relation of causing the token, being pointed at, being perceived, etc.. But this relation *alone* would then be sufficient to explain reference. And, of course, plausible nondescription theories claim that such relations are indeed sufficient to do so. Requiring the speaker to associate a description of the relation does no theoretical work. The description theories’ contribution to explaining reference is redundant. (2004, 300)

So this version of IRH has a *further* redundancy. And this redundancy misleads by entailing that reference is determined by a speaker’s association of a description of a causal-perceptual relation rather than by the relation itself. IRH distracts from the likely truth about demonstratives.

⁸ Similarly, of analogously parasitic causal-descriptive theories of proper names (Devitt and Sterelny, 1999, 61).

There is a less important respect in which IRH misleads. This respect arises because, if reference is determined by a referential intention, then *any* referential intention that can plausibly be ascribed, hence the description it contains, should be a plausible reference-determiner. Gómez-Torrente ascribes not only the intention to refer to the man perceived but also to the man with the martini. As Gómez-Torrente points out, these intentions can conflict: the man perceived is not drinking a martini. That conflict problem increases massively when we note that it may be *just as* plausible to ascribe many other referential intentions to the speaker; for example, she intends to refer to the man wearing the polka dot tie, the man in the corner, and so on. After all, she intends to refer to a person whom she may believe *is* the man wearing the polka dot tie, in the corner, and so on. We face an explosion of referential intentions that can conflict. This worsens Gómez-Torrente's problem of finding a basis for one intention overriding another.

This is really a very old problem for description theories in a new guise. For, stripped of the redundant intentions, it is the problem of finding a *principled basis* for taking any particular description, or even any particular cluster of descriptions, as reference determining (Devitt & Sterelny, 1999, ch. 3). But why suppose that *any one* of these descriptions is reference determining? IRH misleadingly encourages an inference from a plausibly ascribed referential intention to the idea that its contained description is a serious contender for determining reference.

Since referential intentions have no place in the theory of reference, conflicting intentions pose no indeterminacy problem. And there is no problem in the martini case: reference is to the man in which the perception is causally grounded. Similarly, in another of Gómez-Torrente's examples, there is determinate reference to the soccer player in the yellow shirt (32).

This is not to claim that reference is never indeterminate. Indeed, it was central to causal-perceptual theory from the start that confused groundings cause indeterminacy (1974, 200–203). Thus in Gómez-Torrente's Homer-Alexander example (31), his 'that' "partially refers" to both Homer and Alexander but does not determinately refer to either. The "conflict" is in groundings not intentions.

I have no space to discuss Gómez-Torrente's examples of clairvoyance and hallucination (43) but I would argue that they are cases of reference failure.

It is time to say something about demonstrations, and to address Kaplan's delightful example that Gómez-Torrente describes as the "standard illustration of the problem of conflicting intentions" (39).

4 A causal-perceptual theory of demonstrations

The example is, of course, the following:

Suppose that without turning and looking I point to the place on my wall which has long been occupied by a picture of Rudolph Carnap and I say:

(27) Dthat...is a picture of one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century.

But unbeknownst to me, someone has replaced my picture of Carnap with one of Spiro Agnew. (Kaplan, 1979, 396)

It is common for demonstratives to be accompanied by demonstrations. This has misled many into thinking that demonstratives *demand* demonstrations, which then determine reference. That was the view of Kaplan in his classic “Demonstratives” (1989a, 489–491). Yet the view has many problems and Kaplan rightly came to abandon it in “Afterthoughts” (1989b, 582). In light of that, what should we say about this example? To answer, we need a theory of demonstrations.

One reason for thinking that the reference of demonstratives is not determined by demonstrations is that there can be demonstratives without demonstrations. But, similarly, there can be demonstrations without demonstratives. Consider a woman confronted by a line-up and asked the question, “Who mugged you?” She points wordlessly to a man, Harry. She has referred to Harry, and not simply *speaker*-referred to him. Her demonstration in these circumstances is a conventional expression of the thought that Harry mugged her, just as much as would be her responding “Harry” when asked that same question at the scene of the crime. There is a convention of using a gesture toward an object in mind as part of an expression of a singular thought about that object. Demonstrations, like demonstratives, are conventional devices for referring to a particular object in mind.

How is the reference of a demonstration determined? In the same causal-perceptual way as the reference of a demonstrative (Sect. 2). A person’s use of ‘he’ refers to a *male* that is, or was, the focus of her perception. Similarly, her use of a demonstration refers to an *object in the gestured area* that is, or was, the focus of her perception. Perhaps we should say that demonstratives are, but demonstrations are not, *linguistic* referential devices. Whatever, they are referential devices.

Where a demonstrative is accompanied by a demonstration and all goes well, the demonstrative and the demonstration will each semantically refer, in its own right, to the one object. Thus if the earlier speaker had gestured at the man with the martini she would have *doubly* referred to him, once by ‘that’ and once by the gesture. But sometimes all does not go well. Kaplan’s utterance of (27) in the Carnap-Agnew case is an example.

The demonstrative in (27)—Kaplan’s invented ‘dthat’—straightforwardly semantically refers to Carnap’s picture: it is the expression of a thought that was causally grounded in that picture via many earlier perceptions. The trouble comes from the demonstration: even though Kaplan’s pointing was equally grounded in Carnap’s picture, the pointing was not toward it but toward Agnew’s picture. So though Kaplan *speaker*-referred to Carnap’s picture with his gesture, he did not *semantically* refer to it. For, the convention requires that he gesture toward the object in mind. Of course, the gesture makes Agnew’s picture *salient* and hence the audience is likely to *take* that picture to be the referent of both the demonstrative and the gesture. This would be a *misunderstanding* arising from Kaplan’s failure to follow the convention for demonstrations. But, we have agreed (Sect. 1), that salience does not determine reference.

Marga Reimer provides another oft-cited example of things not going well: “I...spot my keys, sitting there on the desk, alongside my officemate’s keys. I then

make a grab for my keys, saying *just as I mistakenly grab my officemate's keys*, 'These are mine'" (1991, 190). I say, though Reimer does not, that her demonstrative semantically refers to her keys. Her grabbing gesture is irrelevant to that but has its own semantics. Like Kaplan's gesture it fails to semantically refer to the object in mind because of a mistake.

Consider now a simple case of misidentification. Suppose that the only keys on the desk are her officemate's. Reimer mistakes them for her own and makes a grab for them, saying "These are mine." This is, of course, simply false. I explain this by saying that both her demonstrative and demonstration are grounded in her housemate's keys. But this misidentification reveals an interesting fact: her demonstrative and demonstration were also grounded in her own keys by earlier perceptions, but *those past groundings are trumped by the present one* (cf. Devitt, 1981a, 143–144).

I conclude with another of Gómez-Torrente's examples. He is in a forest looking at a tree top whilst touching what he wrongly assumes to be the same tree's trunk. Intending to refer to the tree that he sees and touches, he says, "This is a tree with such a nice trunk" (42). His 'this' is causally grounded in one tree by vision and another tree by touch. So it "partially refers" semantically to each but does not determinately refer to either. Does his touch of the tree count as a demonstration? Probably not, but if so it would "partially refer" semantically to the touched tree but not to the sighted tree, because only the touched tree would be in the gestured area.

5 Conclusion

Gómez-Torrente claims that the reference of a demonstrative is fixed in an object by the speaker's referential intentions (IRH). I have argued that this is a mistake. First, I draw attention to a venerable alternative theory that Gómez-Torrente surprisingly overlooks: the reference is fixed in an object directly by a relation established in perceiving the object. Next I criticized IRH, arguing that it is implausible, redundant, and misleading. Finally, I presented a theory of *demonstrations* that is like the alternative theory for demonstratives. For, though demonstrations do not determine the reference of demonstratives, they play an independent referential role which is important in explaining David Kaplan's famous Carnap-Agnew example and many others including some of Gómez-Torrente's.

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