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Some notes on quotation

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Abstract: This paper offers support for, and modification of, Recanati's distinction between open and closed quotation. It also points out two unresolved issues associated with quotation: the problem of reference to meaning, and a new category, tentatively named "noncitational quotation".

1. Introduction

The main existing theories of quotation seem to be these: the identity theory of Frege (1892) and Washington (1992), the name theory of Tarski (1956) and Quine (1940), the description theory of Geach (1950), the demonstrative theory of Davidson (1979) and Cappelen & Lepore (1997), the disambiguation theory of Saka (1998), and the demonstration theory of Clark & Gerrig (1990) and Recanati (2001).

According to the identity theory, quotation marks signal a shift in reference whereby expressions denote themselves, rather than their customary denotation. The naturalness of this theory can be seen in examples like (1):

- (1) a. "Cicero" has 6 letters.
b. "Incipient" is an adjective.
c. "Comment-allez vous?" is a question in French.
d. "Muscle" rhymes with "bustle".

In each case the predicative elements of these sentences apply to linguistic objects, and so it is only natural that the quotation, or the quoted material, should be taken to refer to such an object. Having this material refer to itself in addition has the advantage of making these intuitively true sentences true. The name and description theories could be taken to agree, in essence, with the identity theory. Both hold that the expressions in quotation marks in (1) are referred to. They differ only in how that reference takes place – what the vehicle is (a name or a definite description).

On the demonstrative approach, the quotation marks in the examples in (1) act as demonstrative pronouns, like *this*, *that*, *these*, or *those*. The material inside the quotation marks is as if it were not in the sentence at all, but instead a separate item that is present in the discourse context to be referred to, like a lamp or an addressee.

According to the disambiguation theory, any utterance makes manifest linguistic expressions in all their glory – i.e. their phonological or orthographic, syntactic, and semantic properties. Quotation marks indicate that something other than the usual denotation is being referred to, with the context establishing which of the manifested characteristics that something is.

Finally, according to the demonstration theory, in actual utterances of the sentences in (1), the material within quotation marks would be a piece of demonstration, just as a ballet

teacher might demonstrate the 5 basic foot positions. This accords well with the idea that a variety of gestures or noises can be so cited, as in (2) (from Clark & Gerrig 1990: ex. 28):

- (2) a. The car engine went [brmbrm], and we were off.
b. The boy who had scratched her Rolls Royce went [rude gesture with hand] and ran away.

The examples in (2) should be contemplated as spoken rather than written utterances, of course.

Before continuing we should acknowledge the fact that a variety of different punctuation conventions can and are used when reference to linguistic expressions is desired. What has been said above about quotation marks will go as well, depending on the context, for single or double quotation marks, as well as for italics, underlining, or display. We will return to this and related facts below.

2. Closed quotation

The examples in (1) are all instances of what Recanati (2001) calls **closed quotation**. Recanati characterizes closed quotation as instances in which the quotation “serves as a singular term, filling a slot in the sentence” (Recanati 2001: 649). Closed quotation is opposed to **open quotation**, where the linguistic properties of the quoted material play their customary role in the containing sentence. (Cf. also Potts 2004 for a similar distinction.) The second sentence of this paragraph, repeated below as example (3):

- (3) Recanati characterizes closed quotation as instances in which the quotation “serves as a singular term, filling a slot in the sentence”.

provides an illustration of open quotation. In that sentence, unlike the current sentence, the quoted material – “serves as a singular term, filling a slot in the sentence” – must be read so that its linguistic properties are active or else the containing sentence would be missing a grammatically well formed predicate.

Although Recanati characterizes closed quotations as serving as singular terms, this is too narrow to serve as a definition (a point acknowledged by Recanati (2001, 649, n. 9)). There are other kinds of examples where quoted material shares the crucial characteristic of having its linguistic properties inactive, or inert, with respect to the containing sentence. Consider the examples in (4).

- (4) a. These are not ‘I really should’ radishes.... [Jon Carroll, *San Francisco Chronicle*; cited in Clark & Gerrig 1990: ex. 5b]
b. His speech abounded in I think so’s. [from Jespersen 1924: 96; as cited by Clark & Gerrig 1990: ex. 5e]

These examples are similar to those in (1) in the fact that the grammatical category of the quoted material does not match the slot in the containing sentence into which it fits. If the linguistic properties of the quoted material were taken to be active, the sentences as a whole would be ungrammatical. However, in (4a) the slot is an adjective slot and in (4b) it is a common noun slot, and in neither case does the quoted material behave like a singular term.

Recanati describes closed quotations as displaying **semantic inertia**, meaning that the “linguistic meaning of the displayed material...remains *segregated* from the linguistic meaning of the sentence in which the demonstration serves as a singular term...” (653; italics in original). This is illustrated by the fact that a closed quotation may be in a different language from the containing sentence, as in (5a) below, or may even be meaningless, as in (5b).

Here it is clear that the producer of (7) would not be in agreement with application of the term *art* to the referred to item. The truth conditions of (7), according to Recanati, would be different from, and not entailed by, the truth conditions of (8):

(8) This remarkable piece of art consists of a large canvas covered with mud and old bus transfers.

(Cf. Recanati 2001: 667ff.) Recanati characterizes this type of quotation as **non-cumulative**, because of this disassociation of the speaker from the content.

It should be noted that Predelli (2003), who proposes an analysis of open quotation which is similar in some respects to Recanati's, nevertheless insists that '*art*', in (7), has the same interpretation as *art*, in (8).

[T]he sarcasm associated with a typical use of, say, [7] is to be expected only if it is granted that the occurrence of "art" in that sentence denotes, as usual *art*, that kind of enterprise exemplified by the *Virgin of the Rocks* or the *Tempest*. The sarcastic connotation would be unaccountable on the hypothesis that, when flagged by the quotation marks in [7], the term becomes synonymous with, say, "idle exhibitionism". (Predelli 2003: 5.)

However, it could be argued in reply to Predelli that the sarcasm is explainable, given our ordinary understanding of the word *art*, in using that word for something which clearly does not meet that understanding. In other words, even if it were assumed that the speaker, by putting quotation marks around *art*, intended to make it mean 'idle exhibitionism' (as Predelli suggests) or something of the like, the original meaning of the word and its contrast with the current use (wherein lies the sarcasm) would hardly have been forgotten. This alternative view of things would have the virtue of having the utterer of (7) saying something they believe to be true rather than false. However, I do not wish to take a stand on this issue here. My main purpose is to make clear the distinction between cumulative and non-cumulative open quotation.

3.2. Problems of analysis

It is clear that traditional treatments of quotation had closed quotation in mind. It is only in closed quotation that the quotation, qua quotation, has a denotation, so only in those cases that it would make sense to describe the quotation as a name or a definite description. Unfortunately most of the more recent theories make the same mistake. Even Davidson's demonstrative theory, which was developed in the full light of examples like (9) of open quotation

(9) Quine says that quotation '...has a certain anomalous feature' [from Davidson 1979: 81]

applies only awkwardly to them. Davidson says initially, in presenting his theory, that quoted material does not belong semantically to the sentence it appears in. "[W]hat I propose is that those words within quotation marks are not, from a semantical point of view, part of the sentence at all. It is in fact confusing to speak of them as words" (Davidson 1979: 90).² But of course this

² Washington 1992 has pointed out a problem for Davidson's analysis, even as it applies to closed quotation – the fact that in spoken language, quotation marks are generally not used at all. If we take Davidson at his word, then the spoken version of (1a) should be as bad as (i)

(i) *has 6 letters.

(Cf. also Reimer 1996 and Saka 1998.) Another problem for the Davidsonian approach (noted by Recanati 2001, 654) occurs whether we are talking about spoken language or written language. This is the existence of well-formed utterances which are entirely quotational, e.g.

claim must be taken back for cases of open quotation as in (9). “I said that for the demonstrative theory the quoted material was no part, semantically, of the quoting sentence. But this was stronger than necessary or desirable” (Davidson 1979: 91). In other words, it wasn’t true.

Cappelen & Lepore use the term **mixed quotation** for examples like (3) and (9), above, or (10), below:

(10) Alice said that life “is difficult to understand”. [= Cappelen & Lepore 1997: ex. 4] Their analysis is a revised version of the Davidson treatment, which incorporates Davidson’s demonstrative account of indirect quotation as well (Davidson 1968). On their account (10) instantiates both indirect and direct quotation. The quoted material in (10) is, in essence, treated twice over, once as conveying the meaning of what Alice says and once as conveying the words Alice used. In both cases “the complement clause is in effect semantically excised from [10] and merely demonstrated” (Cappelen & Lepore 1997: 443). In formal terms their analysis of (10) is given in (11):

(11) $u(\text{Says}(a, u) \ \& \ \text{SS}(u, \text{that}) \ \& \ \text{ST}(u, \text{these}))$. Life is difficult to understand. [= Cappelen & Lepore 1997: ex. 26]

In (11) u is a variable over utterances, SS means ‘same-says’ and ST means ‘same-tokens’, and “an utterance of the first demonstrative demonstrates an entire utterance of [*Life is difficult to understand*] and an utterance of the second demonstrative demonstrates (only) the (sub)utterance of ‘difficult to understand’” (Cappelen & Lepore 1997: 444). In a footnote Cappelen & Lepore suggest that

there might be reasons for complicating this logical form by at least adding another quantifier ranging over a distinct (sub)utterance; and also, perhaps, adding another predicate in logical form indicating that whatever utterance this second quantifier ranges over must be a part of whatever utterance the first quantifier ranges over.

(Cappelen & Lepore 1997: 444, n. 22.)

Recanati describes this kind of analysis as “convoluted” and “baroque”, and it is hard to disagree with his judgement that its primary (even only) motivation is maintaining the idea that all quotations are referential qua quotations, despite substantial evidence to the contrary (Recanati 2001: 657).

The disambiguation approach of Saka also stumbles on open quotation. Saka states the following: “Syntactically, a pair of quote marks is a discontinuous determiner (a complex symbol which, applied to an argument expression, produces a noun phrase)” (Saka 1998: 127). If this were true then, as others have noted, the examples in (3), (9), and (10) should be as ungrammatical as (12)

(12) * Louise says that marriage a disaster.

Saka also appears on occasion to deny that words within quotation marks can have their usual semantic interpretation, which would also be counterexemplified by (3), (9), and (10). Thus he asserts the following: “Although quote marks generally do not specify among token, type, form, and concept, they still serve to partially disambiguate, FOR THEY RULE OUT CUSTOMARY REFERENCE AS THE INTENDED INTERPRETATION” (Saka 1998: 127; emphasis added). In a brief reply to Simchen 1999, Saka indicates that he intended the word *generally* in his assertion to

(ii) “I never promised you a rose garden.”

On Davidson’s view (ii) is equivalent to (iii)

(iii) *That. I never promised you a rose garden.

But outside of special contexts, *That* is not a well formed sentence.

have scope over *rule out*, so that the statement I have just quoted would not imply that quotation marks ALWAYS rule out customary reference as the intended interpretation (Saka 2004: n. 1). However, it is difficult to read what Saka originally said in that way. On the other hand that interpretation would help to make the quoted assertion consistent with the sentence (including parenthetical element) which follows it in Saka's text: "Thus, the speaker who uses quote marks announces 'I am not (merely) using expression *X* but am mentioning it'" (Saka 1998: 127). (Of course this latter sentence is unfortunate in that its meanings with and without the parenthetical element contradict each other.)

In Saka's more recent work his earlier view of quotation is further developed and elaborated. He adds a new principle: "In uttering an expression having quotation marks, *S* defeasibly intends for the audience to execute its conceptual content *and* to draw attention to something related to the quoted portion other than its extension" (Saka 2004: 8; italics in original). However, this unhelpfully blurs the distinction between closed and open quotation, a distinction which seems remarkably sharp following Recanati's presentation. And Saka still clings to the idea that quotations are always referential qua quotations. He says:

My earlier work describes quotation marks as determiners, i.e. expressions that combine with quoted matter to form a noun phrase. This is an overly syntactic way of saying that [the] resulting quotations are referential elements, i.e. something that can be used, like the extensions of noun phrases can, in the building of mental models. (Saka 2004: n. 2.)

And even in the opening presentation he says: "Quotations, i.e. quotation marks plus quoted matter, refer" (Saka 2004: 1). This just does not seem to be true of examples like (3), (9), and (10).

4. Some lingering issues

4.1. Reference to meaning

In closed quotation we are speaking about the expression quoted, and may predicate any of the linguistic properties the expression has. The examples in (1), repeated here, are illustrative.

- (1) a. "Cicero" has 6 letters.
- b. "Incipient" is an adjective.
- c. "Comment-allez vous?" is a question in French.
- d. "Muscle" rhymes with "bustle".

We may also use the device of closed quotation to refer specifically to phonetic content, as in the example below.

- (13) a. The sound he made was "glub glub".
- b. The freight train rattled by, making a bustling noise: "cup o' tea, cup o' tea, cup o' tea".

Given that expressions of a language are commonly viewed as sound-meaning pairs we might expect to be able to refer to meaning using the same punctuation mechanism. However this is often awkward as shown by the examples in (14).

- (14) a. "Neige" in French means "snow" in English.
- b. "Neige" in French means snow.
- c. "Dans une minute" in French means "in a minute" in English.
- d. * "Dans une minute" in French means in a minute.

None of these examples are completely natural, and (14d) is in fact ungrammatical. There is an intuitively correct way to express the idea, of course – as in (15):

(15) “Dans une minute” in French means what “in a minute” means in English. However, usually we do not want to be so wordy.

This awkwardness is evidenced by the fact that people often choose a different punctuation notation when they wish to refer to meanings. For example, when Corey Washington wanted to refer to meaning in his 1992 paper, he used not quotation marks, but italics:

(16) ‘ \oplus ’ means *alternatively*. [= Washington 1992: ex. 12]

As this was in a paper about quotation in a major philosophical journal, it would be difficult to view it as a naïve usage. (Note also Predelli’s use of italics in the same way, in the quote in the paragraph following example (8) above.) And in fact Quirk et al. prescribe single quotes for reference to meaning, while suggesting italics for reference to “cited words or expressions” (Quirk et al. 1985: 1635). Another piece of evidence is provided by David Kaplan. In his 1969 discussion of the puzzle of quantification into opaque contexts, Kaplan introduced the idea of **meaning marks**, illustrated in (17).

(17) The meaning of ‘brother’ = ^mmale sibling^m. [= Kaplan 1969: ex. 13]

(Cf. also Garver 1965, who proposes a different notation (attributed ultimately to Max Black) for reference to meaning.) If meaning marks had taken hold, they would have relieved us of the problem illustrated in (14) above. Sadly, they have not.

Why is it that while we can use a quoted expression to refer to its phonetic properties, we cannot use it to refer to its semantic properties? Does this mean that Chomsky (1995) is right, and meaning (in a non-syntactic sense) is not part of language but is instead a feature of the conceptual-intentional systems of the mind/brain? Kaplan, by way of introducing his meaning marks, remarks “The ontological status of meanings or senses is less well settled than that of expressions” (Kaplan 1969: 120), suggesting a divide between meanings and expressions.

4.2 Noncitational quotation marks

None of the theories we have been discussing mentions a particular use of quotation marks that may be growing. That use is exemplified in the examples in (18).

- (18) a. Please use other “door”.
b. “Confidential”
c. We are “closed”
d. “A set of 4 legs with screws”
e. “Committed to Excellence”

Each of the examples in (18) is naturally occurring: (18a) was seen on a door of a pharmacy in San Francisco; (18b) is the entire contents of a rubber stamp employed by the University of Pennsylvania administration; (18c), as reported in Nunberg (1983: 3-4), appeared in the window of a shoe repair shop; (18d) was discovered on a box containing metal table legs; and (18e) appears in an ad for eye doctors in the *Leelanau Enterprise*, June 24, 2004, section 1, p. 10. (I am grateful to Ellen Prince and Polly Jacobson for examples (18b) and (18d), respectively.) I am not sure whether this use of quotation marks has a name. “Greengrocer’s quotes” has been suggested, after “Greengrocer’s apostrophe”, but this seems elitist. Paul Saka has suggested “noncitational quotation marks” (p.c.), and I am grateful for, and happy to adopt, that helpful suggestion.

Although almost all occurrences of noncitational quotation seem to be graphic, there is one possible group of examples of spoken occurrences. The examples in question come from the movie *Austin Powers, Man of Mystery*, in a variety of utterances of Dr. Evil, such as the one in (19).

(19) ... in twelve hours I will destroy Washington DC with this giant “laser”.

The printed quotation marks in (19) represent what Davidson (1979, 79) referred to as “finger dance” quotes, which consistently accompany Dr. Evil’s use of the word *laser*. It is true that the introduction of this word in the film was definitional (*Back in the 60s I developed a weather-changing-machine, which was in essence a sophisticated heat-beam, which we called a “laser”*), but the use of the finger-dance quotes for the remaining occurrences of the term cannot be so explained. (The possibility that these are simply scare quotes, because the “laser” in question is not really a laser, is overruled by the fact that, for Dr. Evil, the machine in question IS a genuine laser.)

Those who have been trained in the niceties of punctuation often find noncitational uses of quotation marks amusing, because the only sanctioned use which would seem to fit the circumstances gives a non-cumulative interpretation, and this is almost certainly not what the author intended. The cumulative use of open quotation would presumably be ruled out by the lack of an evident source for the quotation, or indeed the lack of any need for such a source, the quoted expressions being quite unremarkable.

The main issue raised by noncitational quotation marks is to explain how and why this usage arose – what goes on in the minds of the producers. There are at least two hypotheses that could be entertained here. One is that noncitational quotation arose by extension from either the cumulative or non-cumulative open use of quotation marks. It is true that, although in all the examples given above the quoted expression is common and not worthy of citation, these quoted expressions ARE the main focus of the utterance in each case, and therefore perhaps considered especially significant. Either the cumulative or the non-cumulative use of quotation marks might have given rise to an extended use to mark simply the intended focus of attention, since in those original uses the items so marked are usually central to the assertion in question. However, this would be somewhat at odds with what Nunberg describes as the essence of quotation marks, namely “to mark a text-expression that is to be construed as having been produced in circumstances that differ from those of the surrounding text..., [one that] departs from the presumptive context of production” (Nunberg 1990: 116), and that must cast at least a bit of doubt on this hypothesis. Of course it may be that Nunberg is simply wrong, or alternatively, that the essence of quotation marks has changed. Both are certainly possible.

On a different hypothesis, noncitational quotation has nothing directly to do with the citational uses of quotation marks at all. This second hypothesis would draw attention to the fact that in general, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between punctuation marks and their usages. Underlining, for example, can signal emphasis, serve as a surrogate for italics (in any of the latter’s functions), or indicate text which has been proposed as an addition to some original document. Similarly boldface can be used to introduce technical terms (as it has been here), as well as for emphasis. Small capitals have similar sorts of options. And italics are used for citation (mentioning) as well as for emphasis. It may be that, given an overlap elsewhere in punctuation used for both citation and emphasis, quotation marks, obviously a mechanism for citation, have acquired an emphatic use by analogy. This would be a kind of intralinguistic calque on such punctuation indicators as boldface, italics, and small capitals.

I will not try here to resolve the issue of the origin of this use of quotation marks. I only wish to point it out as something which needs to be explained.

5. Conclusion.

In this paper I have tried to provide commentary on some of the main proposals for analyzing quotation which are currently being put forward. In the main I have supported the analysis of Recanati, and especially his useful distinction between open and closed quotation, although I have tried to indicate a few points of disagreement. I have also pointed out a couple of small issues connected with quotation, whose clarification remains to be achieved.³

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