

TENSES AND MEANING CHANGE

By STEPHEN E. BRAUDE

IN 'Meaning, Reference and Tense' (ANALYSIS, 36.3), Clifford E. Williams criticizes a position I advanced but did not defend in a paper that appeared a few years ago.¹ In that paper I considered and rejected various ways of distinguishing tensed from tenseless sentences. One of these ways is to maintain that nonsimultaneous replicas of a tensed sentence differ in sense (or express different propositions), whereas nonsimultaneous replicas of tenseless sentences do not. It seemed to me then, and still does, that this position is patently false. I provided no argument against the position, however, and instead merely asserted that it is a "brute fact" that successive replicas of such tensed sentences as 'J.F.K. was assassinated' can have the same sense.

Williams charges correctly that I offer no defence of my claim that this is a brute fact about language. But I believe that Williams has failed to see just what sort of fact this brute fact is. I do not intend to offer a fully fledged defence of my claim that my alleged brute fact is a fact, since to do so would require a lengthy account of the nature and development of natural languages generally. But I believe I can make clearer what sort of claim I am making about language.

Williams asserts that I never explain *via* any theory of meaning what it is for two sentences to have the same sense. Unlike Williams, however, I see this as a virtue of my approach. I think it is a mistake to begin an enquiry into tenses with some philosophical theory of what sentences express, and then try to decide whether tensed sentences can express the same thing at different times. A theory of meaning must stand or fall, it seems to me, on the basis of its compatibility with certain pretheoretic assumptions about language use. One of these assumptions is that people can express what they themselves or others have previously expressed by replicating the sentences used at those earlier times. Most of the sentences used in our everyday communicating are tensed, and with respect just to tensed sentences this assumption amounts to saying that replicas of such ordinary sentences as 'Cincinnati won the 1975 World Series' and 'Mary is sad' can express the same thing at different times, when produced either by the same person or by different persons. This is simply part of the data upon which any satisfactory theory of meaning applicable to natural languages must be based. Any language for which this assumption fails is simply not a natural language.

Remember that it takes hardly any linguistic competence at all for someone to express what he or someone else previously expressed. A

¹ 'Tensed Sentences and Free Repeatability', *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 82, No. 2 (April 1973).

child can do it. Suppose that a young boy points to himself and says 'Hungry!', and then, seeing that his parents did not hear him, points to himself again and says 'Hungry!'. Had the child been more expert in speaking the language he might have said 'I am hungry'. But had he produced the more complicated string of sounds he would have expressed nothing more nor less than what he expressed with 'Hungry!'. Now it seems that we must suppose that the child expressed exactly the same thing with his two rudimentary tensed sentences if we are to be talking about a natural language. Any language which failed to incorporate such a simple device for expressing what has been previously expressed would clearly not meet the urgent needs for communication that motivate the development of a natural language in the first place, and it probably would not be a language which idiots and children could use.

I must also protest against Williams' use of a sentence like

(1) The man in black is reading a book now

as a paradigm tensed sentence. Paradigm present-tense sentences do not contain the demonstrative 'now'. Philosophers usually insert the word 'now' into ordinary present-tense sentences to make explicit what they already regard as a reference to the present contained in the sentence. But, since there are those who (like myself) think that in general tensed sentences do not refer to times, this procedure is question-begging. A paradigm tensed sentence is more like

(2) Jones is sick

(3) Smith was born in Boston

and it is not at all obvious that these sentences must express different things at different times.

But even (1), it seems, can have the same sense at different times. Imagine the following dialogue.

Speaker *A*: Look! The man in black is reading a book now.
Thank God he's stopped trying to molest the maid.

Speaker *B*: Well, let me see. Yes, you're right. The man in black is reading a book now.

Furthermore, whatever precisely is meant by saying that the replicas of (1) in this dialogue express the same thing, it is clearly not that they have the same rules of use. Williams suggests I may be presupposing such a view. But that the two replicas of (1) express the same thing has to do with such facts as that 'The man in black' refers to the same person in both cases. And it is not part of the rules of use of the expressions used by Speakers *A* and *B* that anyone in particular gets referred to by 'The man in black'.

It is curious, incidentally, that after pointing out that I do not explain what the *sense* of a sentence is Williams goes on to talk about the *content* of a sentence without explaining what *that* is. How does it differ from a sentence's sense? In terms of what theory of meaning are we to understand contents?

Finally, the closest thing Williams offers to an argument against the acceptance of my "brute fact" is this. He writes,

. . . All [indexical sentences] can have different truth-values when produced in different circumstances, and in order to know what their truth-values are, we have to know what circumstances they are produced in. So, it would seem that (1), too, expresses different contents and refers to different states of affairs at different times. (P. 133.)

As I understand it, the argument, in a more general form, is this.

- (i) Replicas of indexical sentences can take different truth-values in different circumstances of production.
- (ii) To know the truth-value of an indexical sentence, we must know its circumstances of production.
- (iii) *Therefore*, indexical sentences express different contents and refer to different states of affairs in different circumstances of production.

First of all, it is not clear what Williams has in mind when he writes of sentences *referring* to states of affairs. Most tensed sentences do not refer (or even contain references) to states of affairs, though probably all such sentences *report* states of affairs. But, if Williams is concerned with the reporting of states of affairs, then nonsimultaneous tensed sentences can clearly report the same thing and (iii) is false. Consider, e.g., successive replicas of (3): both sentences report Smith's birth. Granted, the different truth conditions of the two sentences may relate Smith's birth to different times (i.e., the times of production of the sentences). But the two sentences do not refer, nor do their truth conditions obviously refer (or perhaps better, contain references), to different states of affairs. Perhaps Williams is saying that a change in a sentence's truth conditions requires a change in proposition expressed. This is a familiar view about propositions, and one which I clearly deny. But the above argument does not establish this view.

If we focus on the other half of the conclusion of Williams' argument—namely, that indexical sentences express different contents at different times, then the argument is simply a *non sequitur*. We can see what is wrong by observing that not all indexical sentences are tensed. Consider the *tenseless* schema

- (4) Event *E* occurs [tenseless] here.

Replicas of instances of (4) *can* have different truth-values, when produced at different places. But they express different contents only in different places. So, although replicas of an instance of (4) can have different truth-values in different contexts, and although we must know what the context is to know what a replica's truth-value is, it does not follow that in different contexts replicas have different contents. Williams thus fails to establish any interesting link between the need to know a sentence's context of production to know what the sentence's truth-value is and what it is that the sentence expresses in that context.

Moreover, there are, as I noted in my article, tensed sentences which *cannot* change in truth-value with time—e.g.,

(5) Nobody has been a married bachelor

(6) I do not exist.

If Williams wants to claim that nonsimultaneous tensed sentences do not express the same proposition, or content, or whatever, he must do so on some basis other than the possibility of a truth-value change between replicas of tensed sentences, since these sentences are necessarily true and false, respectively.

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ASSERTION: A REPLY TO BROOKS

By MICHAEL COHEN

ACCORDING to D. H. M. Brooks, an account of a language in terms of the sense and reference of its sentences merely distinguishes sentences into two classes 'without specifying which of these two classes the language speakers attempt to utter' (ANALYSIS, 36.3, p. 117). We can imagine that a linguist gives us the following information about the language of a tribe: that it contains a sentence $\lceil Fa \rceil$ which belongs to a certain class V of sentences if and only if the object a is round. The linguist however fails to tell us whether V is the class of sentences which these people regard it as correct to utter or the class they try to avoid uttering. Brooks is under the impression that I deny we could have such knowledge of a language. But I find no difficulty in conceiving this. What I deny is Brooks's claim that this knowledge amounts to knowledge of the sense of $\lceil Fa \rceil$.

One obvious objection to Brooks's idea of sense is this. Imagine the language has a sentential connective '*' whose behaviour is described thus: $\lceil P * Q \rceil \in V$ if and only if $P \in V$ and $Q \in V$. Since we do not know which class V is, we do not know whether '*' is a sign for con-