The Meaning of Us

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ERSONAL PRONOUNS LIKE «I», «you», and «he» are taken to be indexicals, that is, expressions that shift their referents from one utterance–context to another. When I use it, «I» refers to me. When you use it, it refers to you. «You» refers to the person the speaker is addressing. Following the work of David Kaplan and John Perry, a lot of work has been done on the similarities and differences among the personal pronouns, and with respect to other indexicals such as demonstratives like «this» and «that», adverbs like «here», «now», «today», and «yesterday» and others.

Not so much work has been done on plural pronouns, though. Perhaps it was assumed, without argument, that nothing interesting comes from the study of «we», «you (plural)», and «they». They just happen to refer to individuals in more or less the same ways as their singular counterparts. Perhaps that's true for «you (plural)» and «they», but it is definitely not the case, as we shall see, with «we». And the aim of the present paper is to study the meaning of the first–person plural pronoun «we», comparing it with the rest of personal pronouns as referential devices.

Among the singular pronouns, «I» has attracted special attention due to its relevance to issues about personal identity and self–knowledge. The study of «we» may prove to be relevant to fundamental issues in the social sciences. Authors working on social and collective action like Gilbert (1989) or Tuomela (1995) claim that there is a core, central meaning of «we» that refers to a group (an agent of collective agency) as different from the mere plurality of individuals. My aim here is to clarify what the meaning of «we» is and its contribution to the content of utterances containing it.

First of all, I start (§1) with a discussion on the place of «we» among indexicals, with special attention to the similarities and differences with the first–person singular pronoun «I». In §2, I consider Vallée's (1996) approach, which takes the meaning of «we» as reducible to the meaning of «I» plus the

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different combinations of «you» singular, «he/she», «you» plural, and «they». I argue that, other things being equal, a basic economy principle of meaning favors our approach, and, moreover, that the cases of co–reference and anaphora posed by Vallée himself and Nunberg (1993) are better explained by it. §3 deals with alleged cases of non–referential uses of «we», including the examples adduced by Nunberg (1993). I contend that a content–pluralistic account inspired by Perry (2012) and Korta and Perry (2011) provides a natural account of these cases, without renouncing «we» as a referential expression. Such an account is presented in §4 and applied to the meaning and content of «we» in §5. I finish by drawing some conclusions in §6.

§1 The Counterpart of «I»

A natural move when studying the meaning and content of (utterances of) «we» is to take it as the plural counterpart of «I», as «they» is for «he/she/it».[1] So, we should start by considering the first person singular pronoun. The Kaplan–Perry[2] account of the pronoun «I» takes an utterance containing it as expressing a singular proposition. So John uttering (1) expresses the same proposition as the utterances of (2) and (3), in the right circumstances (between square brackets), namely (4):

(1)   I am hungry [uttered by John].

(2)   John is hungry.

(3)   He is hungry [uttered by Peter demonstrating John].

(4)   That **John** is hungry.[3]

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[1] The case of the second–person pronoun «you» in English is different from both the first and the third–person. There might be different opinions about what's the best account here. Is «you» an ambiguous word with two alternative meanings? Or are «you (singular)» and «you (plural)» two different homophonic words? This issue should not bother us here.

[2] I ignore here the differences between Kaplan's and Perry's account, and follow mostly Perry (2006, 2007, 2012, forthcoming).

[3] Following Perry's (2012) notation, boldface stands for the propositional constituent: italic when the constituent is an «identifying condition» or «mode of presentation» and not the object that meets the condition; roman when it's the object and not any condition or mode of presentation. So in our example,

(1')   *The speaker of* (**1**) is hungry

The proposition contains John himself as a constituent, and not any description or identifying property of him. It is true if and only if John is hungry, no matter what his name, or whether he utters (1) or not. Arguments about same–saying and counterfactual truth–conditions favor a referentialist view of this sort.

As for the meaning of «I» we can take it to be an utterance–relative sort of property like «the speaker of the utterance», construed as a rule that, for any utterance of «I», picks the speaker of it as its referent. In other words, the meaning (or character) of the pronoun is a function from the meaning of «I» to the speaker of the utterance. «I» is a *pure* or *automatic* indexical because nothing else is needed to fully determine the referent than the objective fact of who produced that particular token of the pronoun. Its referent is determined only by its meaning and a public objective fact —who the speaker is— irrespectively of the speaker's intentions or beliefs, other than the intention to speak English and use «I» with its ordinary meaning. Take a person who believes himself to be Napoleon and utters «I suffered a defeat at Waterloo». He does not produce a true utterance about Napoleon, but a false one about himself.

The adverbs «today» and «yesterday» are also pure or automatic indexicals in this sense. Rip van Winkle, after having slept for 20 years, thought that he had only slept for one night. He uttered «I fell asleep yesterday» on July 3, 1766. He intended to refer to July 2, 1766, but his intentions are irrelevant. The referent of his utterance of «yesterday» is July 2, 1786.[4]

On the other side of the spectrum, we find demonstratives such as «this», «that», which are discretionary. Their linguistic meaning falls very short of determining a referent. Using them, we can refer to almost anything, as long as it is an individual singular entity. To be sure, the contrast between «this» and «that» can provide some hint about the proximity of the intended referent to

and

(1") **The speaker of (1)** is hungry

are different propositions: one about the property of «being the speaker of (1)», the other about John. And this means that (1") and

(1ᵣₑf) **John** is hungry

—but not (1')—are one and the same proposition, that is, represent exactly the same truth–conditions. See Perry (2012), pp. 31–36.

[4] I'm leaving time zones and other complications aside.

the speaker, as the contrast between «he/she/it» can give some information about its gender or (non)animacy but, other than that, the speaker's *directing* intention is determinative.[5]

Somewhere in between, we must place adverbs like «here» and «now». On the one hand, their linguistic meanings take us automatically to an objective parameter of the context of utterance: the place and time of the utterance, respectively.[6] No matter what place and time the speaker believes s/he is in, the utterance of «here» refers to the place of the utterance. And the same for «now» and the time of the utterance. The boundaries of that place or time are not determined by the meaning, though. Suppose, John utters, «It's getting hot here». Does he refer to the room he is in? To the city he lives in? To the whole planet, perhaps? When he utters, «It's getting hot now», is he referring to just the moment while he's talking? Or the day? Or the season? Or the last couple of centuries? Their delimitation, rough as it may be, requires appeal to the speaker's intention. We can say that «here» and «now» are partly automatic and partly discretionary. Automatic, regarding a parameter of the context of the utterance; discretionary, regarding its boundaries. (See Table 1.)

Automatic	Discretionary	Automatic & Discretionary
I, tomorrow, yesterday	He, she, it, that, there, then	We, here, now

Table I. Automatic and discretionary indexicals

As for «we», prima facie, we can admit it as a referential term. Suppose that John utters (5) to me, when I arrive late for a scheduled dinner with him, Frenchie and Joe.

(5) We are hungry.

In these circumstances, by (5) John expresses the following proposition.

(6) That **John, Frenchie** and **Joe** are hungry.

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[5] Again, I'm ignoring the subtleties about what exactly is involved in *demonstrating.*

[6] At least when they are not used demonstratively. For a defence of «here» and «now» as wholly discretionary indexicals see Recanati (2001).

the same proposition that I could express by (7) and (8), or anybody by (9):

> (7)   You are hungry [addressing John, Frenchie and Joe]
>
> (8)   They are hungry [demonstrating John, Frenchie and Joe]
>
> (9)   John, Frenchie and Joe are hungry.

So we can assume that, regarding the content of an utterance, both «I» and «we» are referential expressions, that is to say, they contribute with individuals—a single one, the singular; a plurality, the plural. Regarding their meaning, however, it is absurd to assume that «we» is just the plural counterpart of «I» and just means «the speakers of the utterance» in plural. Utterances have a single speaker, even when they are simultaneous.

On the other hand, it seems that the use of «we» automatically picks out the speaker as one of the referents. Even if John believes he is Napoleon, when he utters «We were defeated in Waterloo», he refers to himself and makes a false utterance. But who else is he referring to? He is referring (or attempting to refer) to someone else, but whoever they are they are not automatically referred to. Even in (5), above, the reference to Frenchie and Joe is not automatic. John might be referring only to Frenchie or to Joe, but that seems to depend solely on his direction intention. In general, the reference to oneself using «we» is automatic; the reference to someone else is discretionary. So, «we» seems like «here» and «now» in this respect. They are partly automatic in their reference to a parameter of the context of utterance; they are discretionary about the boundaries of the place and time of the utterance, and who else is referred to apart from the speaker.

«We» diverges from «I» in another respect. An utterance of «I» cannot fail to refer. That's why «I don't exist», «I am dead» or «I'm not here now» are self–defeating; «I exist», «I'm not dead» and «I'm here now» self–fulfilling.[7] Utterances of «we» do not secure reference. The mere existence of the utterance does not guarantee the existence of anyone beyond the speaker. The speaker may wrongly believe that the other people he is trying to refer to exist. So his utterance of «We are here now» or «We exist» might not be true.

To sum up, we can say that the I–utterances and we–utterances are similar in two respects:

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[7] Leaving aside answering machines etc.

— they both express singular propositions; and

— the speaker, John, refers automatically to himself.

But they differ in three respects:

— with «I» the speaker refers to herself only; with «we», she refers to herself and some other individuals.

— with «I» the speaker refers automatically; with «we», she refers automatically to herself, but the reference to others is discretionary.

— The utterance of «I» secures reference; the utterance of «we» does it only partly.

The meaning or character of «we» should reflect the dual aspect of «we» as a partly automatic, partly discretionary indexical. It's not obvious what's the best way to characterize this meaning. In one of the few analyses of the semantics of «we», Vallée (1996) argues that «we» is a systematically ambiguous word. Let's consider it.

§2 Is «we» ambiguous?

According to Vallée, the multiple meanings of «we» result from the combination of the various indexicals for referring to people. «We» has (at least) eight meanings, namely:[8]

1. «you and I»
2. «you and s/he and I»
3. «you and they and I»
4. «you (plural) and I»
5. «you (plural) and s/he and I»
6. «you (plural) and they and I»

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[8] It would have two more, if we take «he» and «she» apart, and even one more, if we admit some cases of «it» too.

7.   «S/he and I»

8.   «They and I»

In general, other things being equal, principles of explanatory economy favor an account that does not assume ambiguity. As Grice's (1967) «Modified Occam's Razor» establishes, meanings should not be multiplied beyond necessity. We should look carefully, then, at the reasons for posing such an ambiguity.

Vallée's motivations have to do with an attempt to avoid the speaker's intention when dealing with semantic issues. In addition, «we» enters in co–reference relations with proper names and indefinite noun phrases that suggest that (part of) its meaning includes a bound variable, such as the anaphoric «he/she/it». Discussing the possibility of rendering the meaning (character) of «we» as «the speaker and some individual the speaker focuses his intention on», Vallée says:

> Suppose that Peter and I form a tennis team. Using «Peter believes that we will win the game», I would *refer* to myself, the speaker, thanks to the first part of the character, and would have to *intend to refer* to Peter, because the second part of the character requires such an intention. But we are losing something. There is an intuitive semantic relationship between «Peter» and «we», and the notion of co–reference can account for it, while the notion of an intention would prevent us from grasping it. (Vallée 1996, 224)

The meaning of the disambiguated «we» in this case is «he and I», and according to Vallée, the anaphoric link between the proper name, «Peter« and the pronoun «he» would account for the «intuitive semantic relationship» between «Peter» and «we», while invoking speaker's intentions would prevent it. I disagree for various reasons.

First of all, it is not clear how just giving it a label like «co–reference» explains anything about the semantic relationship between «Peter» and (part of the meaning of) «we». «Co–reference» can also be explained through other means than posing a hidden «he» in the disambiguated meaning of «we».

Second, Vallée contends that appealing to speaker's intention prevents us from «grasping the intuitive semantic relation» between «Peter» and «we». However, even if we accept that «we» includes a hidden «he», it is not clear how that can exempt us from invoking speaker's intentions. To begin with,

intentions are needed to get the right meaning—«he and I», in this case—from among the eight possible ones. But then, as nothing in the grammar (including the semantics» of «he») mandates it to be co–referential with «Peter», speaker's intentions need to be invoked to decide whether it is indeed co–referential with «Peter», and an anaphoric rendering is plausible, or whether «he» is used deictically to refer to someone else. The ambiguity account of «we» does not avoid the need to consider speaker's intentions. It is precisely because we attribute to the speaker the intention to refer to Peter, the individual, that we take «Peter», the name, and »we», the pronoun, to be partially co–referential, and not the other way around.

«We», no doubt, can be used intending to include the addressee («you») or addressees («you (plural)»), or some other people («he»/«she»/«they»), but this does not show that «we» is ambiguous among the multiple (combination of) meanings of those other indexicals.

A similar story goes for cases of bound variables. Take this example (by Nunberg (1993) adapted from Partee (1989)):

(10)   Whenever a pianist comes to visit, we play duets.

Admittedly, in one reading of this sentence, «we» includes as a referent, a «he» or «she» that acts as a bound variable, giving us something like

(11)   **the speaker** and *the pianist that comes, whoever he is, whenever he comes, play a duet*

and that could be formalized in a formula with quantifiers corresponding to pairs of times and individuals and the speaker. But notice again that there is no need to interpret it that way. I don't think that that reading is more likely than the reading in which «we» is taken as the speaker and, say, her spouse, both willing to show their talent to the pianist. Nunberg admits that «we» may refer to the speaker and some other person who is not explicitly mentioned. The discretionary part of «we» leaves that entirely open. Only speaker's intentions will settle the issue. It can include the speaker and the addressee, the speaker

and his husband, or what have you, and need not be determined by the presence of another pronoun.[9]

The fact that part of the meaning of «we» can be formally rendered as including a hidden third person pronoun acting as a co–referential term, a bound variable or just as demonstrative does not imply that «we» is ambiguous.

A different approach suggests that the possibility of having all these referents is a consequence of the discretionary aspect of its meaning, which doesn't wholly determine the referential content of an utterance, even when supplemented by the facts of the narrow context. Once the identity of the speaker is fixed automatically, we still have to appeal to the speaker's intentions to determine who s/he is trying to refer to beyond her/himself. This is a case, not of ambiguity, but of *semantic underdetermination*. The meaning of «we» underdetermines its contribution to the referential content of an utterance containing it.

To be sure, in our proposal the meaning of «we» does not have to include anything like «individual(s) the speaker's intention focuses on», (the option that Vallée (1996) discusses). As I show below, the speaker need not focus her intention on any individual. She might be referring to herself and the reader, her neighbors at the condo, or the whole of humanity. So, we may dispense with intentions as an element of the character of «we», but we cannot dispense with intentions to determine what's the relevant content for an utterance of «we». The first–person plural pronoun has a discretionary component.

To sum up, these examples don't favor an ambiguity view of «we» against our treatment. Quite the contrary: they confirm the view that «we» has both an automatic component and a discretionary one. But before developing our approach, we have to consider cases in which allegedly «we» is not wholly referential, since instead of contributing individuals to the content of the utterance, it seems that it contributes a property.

§3. Non–referential uses of «we»

Suppose that a prisoner sentenced to death says to his wardens in the eve of his execution:[10]

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[9] It seems that the fact that «we» refers to the speaker and just a single individual more is given by the meaning of «duet» and nothing else.

[10] Nunberg's original example reads: «I am traditionally allowed to order whatever I like for my last meal». I

(12)   I am allowed to order whatever I like for my last meal.

Following Nunberg (1993), an utterance of (12) does not express a singular proposition about the speaker of the utterance, but a general proposition, a proposition involving a property of an individual, and not the individual itself. It is not about a particular person who happens to be the speaker and condemned to death, but about the property «being a condemned prisoner, whoever he/she is». Thus, according to Nunberg, the indexical «I» in (12) has «more or less» the same interpretation as the attributively used description in (13) (Nunberg 1993: 21):

(13)   The condemned prisoner is allowed to order whatever he likes for his last meal.[11]

Therefore, we have two different and seemingly competing intuitions about the contribution of «I» to what is said by utterances containing it: utterances like (1) «I am hungry» [uttered by John] suggest that its contribution consists in an individual object, John; utterances like (12) that it contributes a property.

This might sound like another instance of the debate between descriptivism and referentialism on singular terms, but actually it is not. According to descriptivism what enters into the proposition expressed by an indexical utterance is the linguistic meaning of the indexical expression; so the contribution of the indexical is neither an individual or individuals, nor a property like «the condemned prisoner», but a property like «the speaker of this utterance» for «I», «the male person demonstrated by the speaker» for «he», and so on. But this is not what Nunberg–like examples are purported to show. Nunberg accepts that indexicals are not descriptive but *indicative* devices, insofar as «its linguistic meaning doesn't figure as part of what is said by the utterance containing it» (p. 4). But this doesn't make him a referentialist either, since «the fact that an occurrence of an expression doesn't contribute the

deleted «traditionally» from the original, because the adverb makes one reading more salient, perhaps. But it also seems to make the content literally false. I leave aside these complications.

[11] It seems that an indefinite description would serve here as well. And that could be conceded by Nunberg too, who says «I» in the example would have «*more–or–less* the same interpretation as the attributively used *description*» (my emphasis). Thanks to Eros Corazza for raising this point.

property provided by its linguistic meaning doesn't mean that doesn't some other property, after all» (p. 5). Nunberg's examples show exactly that in at least some cases the contribution of the indexical to the proposition expressed is neither an individual nor its linguistic meaning, but something like the contribution of a contextually relevant and attributively used definite description.[12]

Notice that Nunberg's case with «I» generalizes to the other pronouns.

(14)   You are allowed to order whatever you like for your last meal [uttered by the warden addressing the prisoner]

(15)   He/she is allowed to order whatever he/she likes for his/her last meal [uttered by the warden demonstrating the prisoner]

(16)   We are allowed to order whatever we like for our last meal [uttered by a prisoner]

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[12] Nunberg distinguishes two independent claims within direct reference theories of indexicals: first, the claim that the linguistic meaning of indexicals is not part of the proposition expressed by indexical utterances; and, second, that the contribution of indexicals to the proposition expressed is an individual. This seems entirely accurate to me. It is also worth noticing that Kaplan's «direct referentialism» is formulated against «descriptivism» and not, as one might think, against «indirect reference», whatever that might be. Kaplan's terminology can be taken to suggest that utterances of *directly* referential expressions refer without the mediation of any Fregean sense or descriptive meaning whatsoever, while *indirectly* referential expressions would refer only through the mediation of a descriptive meaning of some sort. However, this is not what Kaplan is thinking about:

> Some directly referential terms, like proper names, may have no semantically relevant descriptive meaning, or at least none that is specific: that distinguishes one such term from another. Others, like the indexicals, may have a limited kind of specific descriptive meaning relevant to the features of a context of use. Still others, like 'dthat' terms (see below), may be associated with full–blown Fregean senses used to fix the referent. But in any case, the descriptive meaning of a directly referential term is no part of the propositional content. (Kaplan 1989, p. 497).

So, directly referential terms can have descriptive meaning, but that meaning doesn't enter into the proposition expressed. As Nunberg remarks, that doesn't necessarily mean that an individual object is what enters into the proposition; though clearly Kaplan also holds this second thesis for directly referential terms. See also Martí (2008), for a discussion of two versions of direct referentialism.

(17)   They are allowed to order whatever they like for their last meal [uttered by the warden demonstrating the prisoner]

Arguably, all these utterances express a proposition involving the property «being a condemned prisoner» and not particular individuals. Notice again that this property is not identical with the linguistic meaning of the pronouns, so a descriptivist account of indexicals and demonstratives needs also to explain the occurrence of this property in the content of these utterances. I stick to referentialism and try to account for these cases, invoking a content–pluralistic view on indexical utterances inspired by Perry (2012) and Korta and Perry (2011).

§4. A content–pluralistic account of indexical utterances

Suppose that John utters (1), «I am hungry», and Peter utters (2), «John is hungry», more or less at the same time t. They both express a proposition about John; they say the same thing: a proposition that is true if and only if John is hungry at t. So, both utterances share a content that could be characterized by the following proposition:

(1$_{ref}$)   That **John** is hungry at **t**.

This is a proposition that would be true as long as John, the individual, was hungry at t, even if nobody ever uttered (1) and (2) or John's name was David. This is what Perry calls «official» or «referential» content, because it follows the referentialist insight that, at least generally speaking, this is the kind of content that corresponds to what is said by utterances of sentences involving proper names, demonstratives and indexicals. Now, this is not the only content of utterances (1) and (2). Suppose that Peter reads on a blackboard at CSLI:

(18)   I am hungry.

From that utterance and his knowledge of English, Peter understands

(18$_{utt-b}$)   That ***the speaker of* (18)** is hungry ***at the time of* (18)**[13]

which is the kind of content that Perry (2012) calls «Content$_M$» or «reflexive» and Korta and Perry (2011) call the «utterance–bound content», namely, the type of content «where what is fixed is the language, the syntax, and the meanings of the expressions, but not the contextual facts that determine the referents of indexicals» (Perry 2012: 291).

(18$_{utt-b}$) surely is not what the speaker said by (18), but it certainly represents the content of (18) where contextual factors, like the identity of the speaker and the time of (18), are not fixed. It is a reflexive proposition because it is about the utterance (18) itself. In the case of (1), its utterance–bound content is

(1$_{utt-b}$)   That ***the speaker of* (1)** is hungry ***at the time of* (1)**

Now, suppose Peter hears John uttering (1) from the corridor, and has no clue about the identity of the speaker. In this case, since he knows that the time of utterance is *now,* besides (1$_{utt-b}$), the following content of (1) is available to him:

(1')   That ***the speaker of* (1a)** is hungry **now**

which still is a proposition about (1) itself, so a reflexive proposition, but whose time parameter has been contextually fixed. Now, when he turns around and sees the office where the voice is coming from, he gets at this other content:

(1'')   That ***the person in* that office** is hungry **now**

which is not an utterance–bound proposition anymore, that is to say, it is not about (1), but about a time, an office, and the property of «being the person in that office at that time». But that's not what John is talking about, so it's not what John said by uttering (1). Still, it's a content that motivates Peter to walk

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[13] I leave aside the differences between spoken and written language here, and assume that the token–reflexive meaning of «I» is «the speaker of *this* utterance».

into the office and see John, so he is now in position to grasp the referential content of (1), namely,

(1$_{ref}$)   That **John** is hungry **now**.

So, John's utterance has a variety of contents, ranging from the utterance–bound content, through less reflexive or utterance–bound and more incremental contents, to referential content. It might be thought that the latter kind of content is what usually counts as *what is said* by the speaker. It certainly seems to be what John says by uttering (1). It seems also to be the «input» for the generation of the conversational implicatures of his utterance. It is easy to imagine a context in which knowledge about John's appetite is sufficient reason for Peter and the rest of the members of the Pragmatics Project at CSLI to take a break for lunch. So, it's from his understanding of the referential content of (1) that Peter infers «It's time for lunch», and, likewise, it's that very content that motivates Peter to utter

(3)   He is hungry,

demonstrating John and addressing Joana in the office next door. Peter's utterance has different utterance–bound contents but the same referential content as John's, namely,

(1/3$_{ref}$)   That **John** is hungry at **t**,

so Peter has said the same thing as John, and Joana can infer the same implicature as Peter did.

I introduce now another concept that is present in Perry (2012) and Korta and Perry (2011) and Korta (2013): the *operative* content of an utterance. The operative content is the content intended by the speaker to be recognized as the relevant input for the interpretation of implicatures and other perlocutionary effects. The role of operative content can be played by any of the contents of the utterance discussed so far. In the case of (1) and (2), the *operative* content of the utterance is their referential content; (1/3$_{ref}$) is the critical content for the success of the speaker's plan: John intends to produce

an utterance with that referential content and thereby implicate that it's time for lunch; and so does Peter. The difference in the utterance–bound content and further incremental contents explains why (1) allows John and (2) allows Peter to make, in those circumstances, an utterance with $(1/3_{ref})$ as its referential content.

However, as Korta and Perry (2006) argue,[14] the referential content need not always be the operative content of the utterance. Take their example of a conversation about possible guests for a Pragmatics conference in Donostia. John is likely to have someone in mind when he utters

(18)   He is rather unreliable, doesn't have much to say, and always takes a long time to say it,…

So, arguably, John's utterance has the following as its referential content:

(19_{ref}) That **he** is rather unreliable, doesn't have much to say, and always takes a long time to say it.

But even if (19_{ref}) is about a particular man whom John is thinking about and, thus, referring to, it's reasonable to think that John does not intend Kepa to recognize that referent, and Kepa doesn't need to recognize it to understand what John is implicating. Kepa doesn't need to get to (19_{ref}); he doesn't have to identify who John is talking about. Something like «the male person John is thinking about» is enough for their conversational purposes. That's why, instead of asking John who is he talking about, he just remarks «Next!» (Korta and Perry 2006, p. 182).

To sum up, utterances systematically have a variety of contents or truth–conditions discernible in function of the contribution of the semantics of the expression uttered (the utterance–bound content), and the various contextual factors (having to do with the speaker's plan and the circumstances of the utterance) that when «loaded» give way to several, less reflexive, more incremental contents until we get the referential content of the utterance. The operative content of the utterance, then, can be the utterance–bound content, the referential content or one of those «intermediate» contents. We are now

[14] See also Korta (2013), and Korta and Perry (2011, 2013, forthcoming).

best equipped to clarify the meaning and content of utterances containing «we», and deal with the kind of examples posed by Nunberg.

§5. The contents of *we*–utterances

As we argued above, «we» is partly automatic in referring to the speaker of the utterance and partly discretionary in referring to other individuals. Those individuals are supposed to be animated. While driving home I don't typically refer to my car uttering «We are getting there», but I can refer to my companion, say, my dog.

So, we can take the token–reflexive meaning of «we» to be something like «the speaker of the utterance and some other animated individual(s) the speaker is referring to». That would be the semantic contribution of «we» to the utterance–bound content of any utterance containing it. The utterance–bound content of (5) is, then, the following one:

(5$_{utt-b}$)   That ***the speaker of* (1)** and ***some other animate individual(s) the speaker of* (1) *is referring to*** are hungry.

Suppose that John utters (5) to me, when I arrive late for a scheduled dinner with him, Frenchie and Joe. Listening to John I have no problem in getting the referential content of his utterance:

(5$_{ref}$)   That **John, Frenchie** and **Joe** are hungry,

which allows me to guess the implicatures of John's utterance, perhaps something like the following:

- That they are a bit impatient;
- That I should apologize;
- That I should not arrive late again
- …

However, I followed quite different paths for identifying the referents of «we:» I identified John using my knowledge of the meaning of «we» plus my perception of John as the speaker of (5); I identified Frenchie and Joe, guessing about John's referential intentions: the dinner plan included the four of us, and they might have been talking about their appetite while they waited for me.[15]

To put it briefly, «we» has a meaning that reflects its partly automatic, partly discretionary nature. This is the (type of) contribution that it makes to the utterance–bound content of utterances containing it, but those utterances will systematically have a variety of contents, through the fixation of contextual parameters, that will paradigmatically result in the referential content of the utterances, with the speaker and other individual(s) as constituents.

The referential content need not always be determined, though. Imagine that, in his presidential address to the APA members, John's first words are

(20)   We are shabby pedagogues.

What is he saying? Who is he referring to by his use of «we»? As competent English speakers —hearers, in this case—, the audience knows that he is referring to himself and some other person or persons. They know its minimal semantic content:

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[15] More recently, Vallée (2009) recasts his ambiguity account of «we» in content–pluralistic terms, according to which «we» is not ambiguous with eight possible meanings, but we systematically have eight reflexive or utterance–bound contents. Thus

> The problem is not to disambiguate «we» or that utterance of «we», or to identify one of the conventional meanings of «we», but to eliminate irrelevant reflexive contents, and to identify the actual reflexive content and the official [referential] truth–conditions of the utterance. (Vallée 2009: 563)

It is not clear to me, however, where these utterance–bound contents come from, if a systematic ambiguity in the linguistic meaning of «we» is not postulated. Remember that reflexive or utterance–bound contents of an utterance are the result of the linguistic meaning of the sentence uttered plus the fact that the utterance has occurred. A multiplicity of possible utterance–bound contents of an utterance must be the result of some ambiguity, vagueness or underdetermination in the linguistic meaning of the sentence. Concluding as Vallée does, that «'[w]e' as type lacks context–sensitive descriptive conventional meaning» (560) leaves us without a clear answer to this issue.

(20$_{\text{utt–b}}$) That ***the speaker of* (20)** and ***other individual(s) the speaker of* (20) *is referring to by his use of* «we»** are shabby pedagogues.

Given that they are looking at him as he speaks, they also grasp what is captured by this proposition:

(20') That ***the person in front of* us** and ***other individual(s) he is referring to by his use of* «we»** are shabby pedagogues.

Given that they also know that the person in front of them is John, they get:

(20'') That **John** and ***other individual(s) referred to by* his *use of* «we»** are shabby pedagogues.[16]

Given the automatic side of «we», this is just a matter of knowing English and identifying who the speaker is. However, it might not be that clear who the other individual(s) referred to is (are). Is he referring to the audience at the APA meeting? Is he referring to the APA members? Is he referring to all philosophers in the world? It seems that all these possibilities and many more are open. All we can arrive at without appealing to his intentions in uttering (20) is (20''). His intentions are what determine the contribution of «we» to the contents of the utterance beyond (20''). There are two important remarks to make at this point:

— We cannot take (20'') as the referential content or what John said in uttering (20), but it is no doubt a full proposition; a proposition usable for the inference of further implicatures, without having to determine the referential content of his utterance, what he said uttering (20).

— Let's suppose that by his use of «we» John intends to refer to all the members of the APA. Can he reasonably have that intention? He

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[16] Korta and Perry (2011) call this kind of content, with the speaker of the utterance fixed, the «speaker–bound» content of the utterance. I ignore these details here.

surely knows many APA members, but certainly not all. Can he refer to people he doesn't know by his use of «we»?

The latter questions suggest again that the operative content of an utterance can be distinct from its referential content. In this case, we can take the operative content of (20) to be the following one:

(20$_{op}$)   That **John** and *the APA members* are shabby pedagogues,

which, given that John is also a member of APA, turns out to be equivalent to

(20$_{des}$)   That *the APA members (among them* **John)** are shabby pedagogues.

This seems to be the operative content of (20) since it's at least questionable that John can have any intention regarding its referential content. Be that as it may, notice that (20$_{des}$) is very similar to the interpretation in the sort of examples discussed by Nunberg: «we» ends up giving a property that is not part of its linguistic meaning. But not only a property; it gives us an individual—John himself.

Take again the case of the condemned prisoner who utters

(16)   We are allowed to order whatever we like for our last meal.

In our account, one of the contents of (16) is its utterance–bound content, determined by the meaning of the sentence plus the fact that (16) has been produced:

(16$_{min}$)   That *the speaker of* **(16)** and *other individual(s) the speaker of* **(16)** *is referring to by his use of* «**we**» are allowed to order whatever they like for their last meal.

Once the warden identifies the speaker of (16) as John Smith, he can understand another, more incremental but still not wholly referential content of (16):

(16')   That **John Smith** and *other individual(s)* **he** *is referring to by his use of* «**we**» are allowed to order whatever they like for their last meal.

At this point, the warden can wonder who these other individuals might be, but he can also easily realize that the speaker has no particular individuals in mind, but just those who, like himself, are (have been and will be) condemned prisoners on death row. So the operative content of (16) would be the following:

(16$_{op}$)   That **John Smith** and *the condemned prisoners* are allowed to order whatever they like for their last meal,

or, if you prefer,

(16$_{des}$)   That *the condemned prisoners (including* **John Smith**) are allowed to order whatever they like for their last meal.

I see (16$_{op}$) and (16$_{des}$) as equivalent, though the latter can make clearer the similarity between this content and Nunberg's interpretation of cases like that: he sees indexicals as contributing what a definite description used attributively would, that is, a property or identifying condition. We agree on that. But, in my view, both «I» and «we» contribute also with an individual, the speaker, and they do so automatically.[17]

Now, does (16) have a referential content? Well, it depends on one's conception of referring. If you think that a speaker can refer to an individual without knowing anything other than that he/she met, meets or will meet an identifying condition like 'being a condemned prisoner,' then we have a referential content like

(16$_{ref}$)   That **the condemned prisoners (including John Smith)** are allowed to order whatever they like for their last meal.

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[17] Moreover «we» contributes the idea of plurality: the property is instantiated by several individuals. This might be clearer in (16$_{op}$).

But whatever you think about the referential content of (16), it seems clear that it's not the operative content of John Smith's utterance, for it does not play any role in his plan as speaker.

A similar story can be told about the pronoun «they». If I utter today

(21)   They say that Palo Alto is a quiet town,

with «they», I might be referring to Frenchie, John, David, Lauri and Dikran. Then, they would be part of the referential content of the utterance. But I need not. I might be employing it «impersonally», and utter «they» with no one in particular in mind, intending just to report general opinion, or extended belief. Does this mean that, in this case, the utterance is devoid of referential content? Well, on the one hand, for the utterance to be true, there must be some individuals that really say that Palo Alto is a quiet town, but in impersonal uses, it's clear that the speaker doesn't intend to refer to them and the hearer need not identify them to understand the utterance. So, in these cases, the operative content of an utterance of a sentence containing «they» is not the referential content. The difference between «they» and «we» is that while the first is wholly discretionary, «we» has an automatic component that contributes with the speaker of the utterance to the referential content.

When we use the «tour guide» convention of academic writing, as I did sometimes in this paper, «we» refers automatically to the author, and the operative content is supplemented with a property like «being a reader of this text».[18] I could hardly have particular persons in mind to whom I intend to refer with my use of «we». It is not surprising either to find that different occurrences of «we» have different contents even in the same sentence:

> *We* [the scientific community] do not know much about this part of the brain, which plays such an important part in *our* [humanity in general] lives, but *we* [the writer and the reader] will see in the next chapter… (example (10) in Nunberg, p. 11).

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[18] In some cases it seems that the speaker does not refer to herself. Take the football coach who shouts «We should defend harder!» to her players, or a nurse in a hospital asking the patient «How are we today?» In this paper, I take these examples as exceptions that confirm the rule.

In our picture, the contribution of «we» to the operative content of these utterances is the author himself and a property (a different one in each occurrence).

Anyway, we should distinguish these cases of «unintended reference» from cases of actual reference failure. This is another difference between «I» and «we». As we said above, the former cannot fail as a referential device. Whenever a speaker uses «I», she automatically refers to herself.[19] Whenever she uses «we», she also refers automatically to herself, but she might fail to refer to someone else, because there is no someone else to refer to. Take the short story entitled «Borges and I» by Jorge Luis Borges. In this story, the author plays with the idea of being two different people: on the one hand, Borges, the famous writer, referred to by the proper name «Borges»; on the other, the author of the short story, referred to by «I». So, it's clear to whom the author is trying to refer by his use of «ours» and «us»:

(22)   It would be an exaggeration to say that ours is a hostile relationship.

(23)   I do not know which of us has written this page.

The reader who doesn't realize that the author of the story is Borges himself would take it to be about two different people, and would take «ours» in (22) to be about them: Borges and the author of the story. By the end of the story, when reading the last sentence (23), he should suspect what's going on. There is no one else to be the referent of «us», «ours» and «we», but Borges himself.[20]

Another interesting case of possible reference failure is presented by Nunberg (1993, p. 12, fn. 22). An American who thinks he is Napoleon, utters

(24)   We suffered a defeat at Waterloo.

Had he uttered «I suffered a defeat at Waterloo» there would be no doubt: no reference failure; he would automatically refer to himself, and the utterance would have been false; period. But with «we' things are not so clear. Nunberg

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[19] We are ignoring cases of meaning transfer such as «I am parked out back» or «re–usable» utterances such as the ones considered by Predelli (1998) and Perry (2003).

[20] See Perry 2007 for a thorough discussion of «Borges and I».

hesitates to conclude whether the speaker refers here to the Americans, to the Frenchmen or to anyone at all. In our view, the automatic part of «we» and the fact that he is the speaker determines that the speaker is referred to; the discretionary part depends on the speaker's intention, and in the example, given his beliefs, he intends to refer to the Frenchmen, so the operative content of (24) would be:

(24_{op}) That **the speaker of (24)** and *the Frenchmen* suffered a defeat at Waterloo.

Since he didn't suffer that defeat the utterance is false.[21]

§6. Conclusions

To sum up, «we» is an indexical with a hybrid meaning—partly automatic, partly discretionary. It automatically fixes its referent with respect to an objective parameter of the context —the speaker— irrespective of the speaker's intention; in that respect, «we» is exactly like «I». However, it has a discretionary part, which makes the reference also dependent on the speaker's intention: besides the speaker, some other individuals might be referred to by her use of «we». We say they «might» for two different reasons:

–   even if the speaker intends to refer to someone else, she may fail simply because there is no one else to refer to. In this case, we can talk of (partial) reference failure.

–   the speaker might intend to refer to no one else beyond herself but to convey a property or identifying condition. In this case, the referential content of the utterance is questionable. We can talk, as regards the reference due to the discretionary part of «we», of an unintended reference to other individuals beyond oneself.

[21] In this case, there seems to be a difference between (24_{op}) and the following content:

(24_{des}) That *the Frenchmen (including* **the speaker of (24))** suffered a defeat at Waterloo,

which is likely to be the content intended by the speaker, given his beliefs. But given that his beliefs are wrong his intention to refer to himself as a Frenchman is arguably a failure.

Anyhow, the absence of a referential content does not mean that the utterance is devoid of content or that its content is incomplete, not fully propositional. There is a variety of contents, from the utterance–bound content to more incremental contents. Moreover, it will often be the case that one of these contents, and not the referential content, is what we have called the operative content of the utterance; that is, the content that accounts for the cognitive motivation and cognitive impact of the utterance, due to its role in the speaker's plan. This is what happens with Nunberg–like examples, where the operative content does justice to Nunberg's interpretation but also to the intuition that there is an automatic reference to the speaker.

Finally, the core or central meaning of «we» invoked by Gilbert (1989) or Tuomela (1995) is not part of the meaning of «we», but a possible element in the operative content of the utterance, which, depending on the speaker's intentions, can include collective interpretation of the referents instead of a mere additive or a distributive interpretation. This is not, however, particularly linked to the meaning of «we», but to all plural referential terms.*

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