



**HAL**  
open science

## De Se Assertion

Isidora Stojanovic

► **To cite this version:**

| Isidora Stojanovic. De Se Assertion. 2008. ijn\_00280484v1

**HAL Id: ijn\_00280484**

**[https://hal.science/ijn\\_00280484v1](https://hal.science/ijn_00280484v1)**

Preprint submitted on 18 May 2008 (v1), last revised 23 Jan 2013 (v5)

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# De Se Assertion

Isidora Stojanovic

Institut Jean-Nicod – CNRS – EHESS – ENS

isidora.stojanovic AT ens.fr

## abstract

David Lewis (1981) famously proposed an account of *de se* beliefs in terms of self-ascription of properties. The gist of his proposal was that the content of, for example, Mirka's belief that she is hungry, which she might express by saying "I am hungry," is simply the property of being hungry, and it is a property that Mirka ascribes to herself. Lewis never held, though, that the content of *assertion* should be analyzed along the same lines, and the dominant view today is that if Mirka says "I am hungry," the asserted content, or *what is said*, is the proposition that Mirka is hungry (at a given time). In this paper, I argue, against the dominant view, that Lewis's proposal for *de se* attitudes plausibly holds for assertion as well. The content of Mirka's utterance of "I am hungry" is, I suggest, the property of being hungry, and it is a property that Mirka asserts *of herself*. My primary motivation comes from the fact that when two speakers say "I am hungry," it is correct to report them as having said the same thing. It has often been held that the possibility of such reports comes from the fact that the two speakers are, after all, uttering the same words, and are in this sense "saying the same thing". I will show that this approach fails, and that it is neither necessary nor sufficient to use the same words, or words endowed with the same meaning, in order to be correctly reported as having said the same thing. I will also show that reports of same-saying in the case of *de se* assertion differ significantly from such reports in the case in which the speakers are merely implicating the same thing.

## §1. The received wisdom on *what is said*

The dominant view in philosophy of language, inherited from David Kaplan, is that *what is said* by a speaker using a sentence that contains an indexical pronoun differs

from the lexically encoded meaning of the sentence in that, on the one hand, it includes (the specification of) the pronoun's referent (as determined in the context of utterance), and, on the other, does not include the lexically encoded conditions that help determining the referent, such as the condition of being the speaker in the case of 'I', or of being female in the case of 'she'. Suppose that on Friday May 16, 2008, at noon, Mirka says:

(1) I am hungry.

While the meaning of (1) is, roughly, that *the speaker of (1) is hungry at the time of (1), what is said* by (1), according to the standard view, is the proposition that Mirka is hungry on 5/16/2008 at noon. There are two intertwined motivations for this view. Suppose that at the same time as Mirka utters (1), Sergeï points at her and says:

(2) She is hungry.

Then we can correctly report that Sergeï as having said, in (2), the same thing as that which Mirka said in (1). Indeed, they both said that Mirka was hungry. Or, suppose that on Saturday May 17, 2008, Alex says:

(3) Mirka was hungry yesterday at noon.

There are fairly robust intuitions that Mirka in (1) and Sergeï in (3) said the same thing, and that one may correctly report them as having done so.<sup>1</sup>

The previous example involves speakers who same-say using sentences whose meanings are not the same. The second motivation for the standard view concerns speakers who use sentences with the same meaning, yet fail to same-say. Suppose that on Saturday, May 17, 2008, Alex says:

(4) I am hungry.

---

<sup>1</sup> A note on the methodology is in order. The intuitions on what is said, and the intuitions on the truth values of reports of what is said, on which this is based (especially Sect. 2 and 3) have been tested on a modest sample of native, theoretically unbiased speakers. Of course, that will not meet the standards of experimental psycholinguistics, but there is at least some empirical grounding to it.

Those who share Kaplan's intuitions would insist that what is said by Mirka in (1) and what is said by Alex in (4) are different things. Cf. Kaplan (1989: 500):

What is said in using a given indexical in different contexts may be different. Thus if I say, today, "I was insulted yesterday," and you utter the same words tomorrow, what is said is different [...] There are possible circumstances in which what I said would be true but what you said would be false. Thus we say different things.<sup>2</sup>

## §2. *De se* assertion

It has been pointed out many times that cases such as the pair (1)-(4) are as much of a problem for the standard view as they may be a motivation for it (see e.g. Feldman (1980), Lewis (1980)). On the one hand, Kaplan is arguably right to say that, *in some sense*, what Mirka says in (1) is different from what Alex says in (4). As we have seen, Mirka's utterance of (1) says, *in some sense*, the same thing as (2) or (3), but there is no such sense in which Alex's utterance of (4) says the same thing as either (2) or (3). But on the other hand, there is, to use Lewis's words, an "equally legitimate" sense in which Mirka in (1) and Alex in (4) do say the same thing. Indeed, each says that he or she is hungry.

The intuition that in some important sense what Mirka says in (1) is the same as what Alex says in (4) is further supported by our linguistic practices of reporting what is said. Consider the following dialogue:

(5) Alex: I am hungry.

(6) Sergei: Mirka said that, too.

Sergei's report in (6) is ambiguous. It can be understood as reporting Mirka to have

---

<sup>2</sup> Both motivations may be traced to Frege, who wrote: "The sentence 'I am cold' expresses a different thought in the mouth of one person from what it expresses in the mouth of another. [...] It is not necessary that the person who feels cold should himself give utterance to the thought that he feels cold. Another person can do this by using a name to designate the one who feels cold" (1899: 236).

said that *Alex* is hungry, or that *she herself* is hungry.<sup>3</sup> This ambiguity is very similar to the well-known syntactic ambiguity with VP-ellipsis. Suppose that Sergeï says:

(7) I love my wife, and so does Alex.

On its “strict” reading, (7) says that Alex loves Sergeï’s wife, while on its “sloppy” reading, it says that Alex loves *his own* wife. Given this apparent similarity, I will use the “strict/sloppy” terminology for the ambiguity that we find with reports of same-saying such as (6).

### §3. What is wrong with the standard response

In the previous section, we saw that when different people say “I am hungry,” there is a sense in which they are saying the same thing, for each is saying that he or she is hungry. The standard response to this sort of cases is to point out that the same sentence is uttered, which would then explain why we are inclined to hear them as saying the same thing – for, after all, they are uttering the same words. I will now argue that this is not the right response to the problem of what is said in *de se* assertion: although the use of one and the same sentence may partly account for the intuition that the same thing has been said, that cannot be the end of the story, as it is neither *necessary* nor *sufficient* to use the same sentence in order to be same-saying. I will first provide cases in which two speakers are using sentences that have different meaning as well as different contents (relative to their respective contexts), yet there is a sense in which they are saying the same thing – indeed, as strong as in the case of (1)-(4). Then I will provide cases in which two speakers are using the same sentence,

---

<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, the report in (6) is four-ways ambiguous because of the contribution of the present tense: it can report Mirka as having said that Alex was hungry at the time when she said it, or that he is hungry at the time of (5), or that she was hungry at the time when she said it, or that she is hungry at the time of (5). For the sake of clarity, I will leave aside any issues raised by the contribution of tense. (But see my (2007: 111-117) and (2007: 133-135) for discussion.)

but cannot be correctly reported as having said the same thing (unless we make it explicit what each speaker was referring to).

### §3.1. *Different meanings, different contents, same thing said*

Suppose that Alex and Sergeï are talking about the classes they like or dislike, and Sergeï says:

(8) I really like Prof. Cheng's class on Montague.

The next day, during Prof. Cheng's class on Montague, Mirka tells Alex:

(9) I really like this class.

Alex may correctly reply to Mirka:

(10) That's what Sergeï said, too.

The sentences used by Mirka and Sergeï are different, and so are their lexically encoded meanings. But the (Kaplanian) contents associated with (8) and (9) are also different, the one being a singular proposition about Sergeï, and the other, about Mirka. Despite all this, the report in (10) has a true reading, on which Sergeï is reported as having said that *he* liked Cheng's class. If it is, for instance, common knowledge in the context of (10) that Sergeï has no idea who Mirka is and could not have said anything explicitly about her, then this reading prevails over the one on which he is reported as having said that *Mirka* liked that class.

### §3.2. *Same meanings, different things said*

Just as using the same sentence is not required for same-saying, it is not enough either. Consider the following (minimal) pair of dialogues:

(i) *de se* assertion

(11) I am a fool. (Mirka talking to Alex)

(12) I am a fool. (Sergeï talking to Alex)

(13) That's what Mirka said, too. (Alex's reply to Sergeï)

(ii) *de te* assertion

(14) You are a fool.

(Prof. Cheng talking to Mirka, overheard by Alex)

(15) You are a fool. (Alex talking to Sergeï)

(16) (?) That's what Prof. Cheng said, too. (Alex talking to Sergeï again)

There is a striking asymmetry between the 1<sup>st</sup> person and the 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun in how they behave in speech reports. Consider (13). As it stands, it has two readings: the strict reading, which reports Mirka to have said that *Sergeï* is a fool, and the sloppy reading, which reports her as having said that *she* was a fool. If it is, say, common knowledge in the context of (13) that Mirka would have never said such a thing about Sergeï, the dominant reading of (13) is its sloppy reading, and (13) will be true in virtue of Mirka's having uttered (11). However, if we try the same sort of sloppy report by simply replacing 'I' by 'you', no such report seems to be available. For, there is a strong intuition that (16) is not ambiguous, but downright false (assuming that Prof. Cheng never said that *Sergeï* was a fool).

The difference between the 1<sup>st</sup> person pronoun and the 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun is even more striking. Consider the following case, minimally different from (i) or (ii):

(iii) *de re* assertion

(17) She is a fool. (Prof. Cheng, talking of Mirka)

(18) She is a fool. (Alex, pointing at Miranda)

(19) (?) That's what Professor Cheng said, too. (in reply to Alex)

Again, (19) is not ambiguous. Only one reading seems to be available, viz. the one on which what Cheng said is that *Sergeï* was a fool.

To forestall a possible misunderstanding, I am not claiming that there is no sense whatsoever in which Cheng in (14) and Alex in (15) could be taken to have said the same thing. For instance, we may take them to be same-saying insofar as they both say *of their addressee* that he or she is a fool. But if this should serve as grounds for reporting what they said as being the same, the mere report in (16) won't do. What is further required is that the reporter make it explicit that the addressee was someone else. E.g., Alex may reply to Sergei: "That's what Prof. Cheng said, too, *to Mirka*," and this report will now be ambiguous between a sloppy and a strict reading.

With the 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun, one can similarly report that the same thing has been said, provided that one makes it explicit that different things were talked about. Thus the following report, based on Cheng's utterance of (17), becomes correct:

(20) That's what Professor Cheng said, too, about Mirka.

There is, then, a visible asymmetry between reports of *de se* assertion and other cases, since in the former, unlike the latter, the reporter does not have to make it explicit that the reportee was talking about herself or himself. This asymmetry raises the following problem. Suppose that Kaplanian contents play the role of what is said. Now, (11) and (12) have different contents, and still, in an important sense, they say the same thing: in both cases, the speaker is saying of herself or himself that she or he is a fool – which also shows up in the fact that, properly disambiguated, the report in (13) comes out true. Now, one might think that this is because the sentences uttered in (11) and (12) are the same. But this explanation won't work: take (14)-(15) and (17)-(18). There, too, the sentences uttered are the same, but we do not get a sloppy reading for either (16) or (19). Those reports are not ambiguous, but false. This shows that something was missing in the account that the standard view gave us for the *de se* cases in the first place.



### §3.3. *De se* assertion vs. the implication sense of 'what is said'

< In this section, I show that there is a difference between reports such as (13), which fall on the side of *literal* uses of the expression 'what is said', and reports in which two speakers who are simply implicating the same thing are reported as having said the same thing, which fall on the side of *loose* uses of the expression 'what is said'. >

## §4. Asserting properties

Adapting Lewis's theory of *de se* attitudes, I propose to model the content of assertion as a property – or, more precisely, as a function from sequences containing an individual, a time, a world, and perhaps other parameters, into truth values – , rather than a proposition. However, a crucial point is that people do not assert such functions *simpliciter*: they only assert them *about*, or *with respect to*, or *of* objects, places, events, people or, as the case may be, of themselves. In other words, the relations of *saying* and of *asserting* are not to be seen as binary relations (between the speaker and that which is said / asserted), but rather, as ternary relations among the speaker, that which is said / asserted, and that about which the it is said or asserted.

A couple of examples may help illustrate the point. Suppose that, pointing at a work of art, I simply utter "Impressive!" Then I will be saying something *about* that very work of art, and what I will be saying of it is that it is impressive. In other words, the property of being impressive is asserted *of* the object at stake. Similarly, if, talking of the same object, I say "It is impressive," what I have said is, I suggest, again just the property of impressiveness, and it is asserted *about* that work of art.<sup>4</sup>

Just as speakers may say something about various other things or people, they

---

<sup>4</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I ignore here the issue of whether in saying that something is impressive, one is also saying something about oneself, viz. that the thing at stake is impressive from *their* point of view. For a discussion of this idea, and of evaluative predicates more generally, see my (2008).

may say things *about themselves*. For instance, if I say “I am hungry”, what is said is, I suggest, the property of being hungry, and I assert it *of myself*. Assertion *de se* is, of course, correlated with the use of the first person pronoun.

In the simple sort of case in which the sentence uttered consists of a pronoun followed by a verb phrase, what is said is, then, the property denoted by the verb phrase, and it is said of that thing of person which is being referred to with the help of the pronoun. But there may be cases in which the pair <what is said, that of which it is said> does not map so neatly on the pair <what is denoted by the verb-phrase, what is referred to by the noun-phrase>. For instance, suppose that at a conference, I say “Most people are philosophers.” I suggest that what is said is still a property, but not the property of being a philosopher that would be said “of most people.” Rather, that which is talked about is a certain situation, namely, the conference, and what is said that property satisfied by an object, such as a conference, when most people *at it* are philosophers. The proposal concerning quantifiers is, of course, to be argued for, but for the sake of simplicity, I will focus in this paper on simple cases, and simply acknowledge the complexities to which one is led as soon as one starts looking at constructions that involve more than a pronoun and a verb phrase.

Let me briefly show how my account handles the cases discussed in the previous section. Recall the kind of example that motivated Kaplan’s view:

- (1) Mirka: I am hungry.
- (2) Alex (pointing at Mirka): She is hungry.
- (3) That’s what she said, too.

The data to be accounted for are the intuition that, at least in some sense, what is said by (1) is the same as what is said by (2), and the related intuition that the report in (3) is true. In my view, what is said by (1) is a function that takes an individual

(and a time and a world) and return value True iff that individual is hungry (at the time and world at stake). What is more, Mirka is asserting this function of herself. Now, what is said by (2) is that very same function, but Alex is asserting it not of himself, but *of Mirka*. Hence, what is said by (1) and (2) is the same – it is one and the same function, one that corresponds to the property of being hungry. Furthermore, this property is asserted *about one and the same person*, namely Mirka, which is going to play a central role in accounting for the truth of the report in (3). Before I show how, let me look at a case that may appear to be problematic for my view. Compare (1) and (2) with the following pair (where (5) is the same as (2)):

(4) Miranda (pointing at Sergeï): He is hungry.

(5) Alex (pointing at Mirka) She is hungry.

(6) (?) That's what Miranda said, too.

According to the standard view, what is said in (4) is different from what is said in (5), the first being the proposition that Sergeï is hungry (at a given time), and the second, the proposition that Mirka is hungry. In my view, what is said in (4) is the same as what is said in (5): it is one and the same function, viz. the property of being hungry. However, the report in (6) is clearly false as it stands, and (4) and (5) are not perceived as saying the same thing. How do I account for that?

I hold that the intuition that (4) and (5) say different things results from the the intuition of falsehood of reports such as (6). Second, I hold that the report in (6) is false for the following reason. Since the reporter in (6) does not explicitly say of whom Miranda said the same thing, the default interpretation, if not the only interpretation available in the context of the report, is that she would have said it about the same person as Alex did, namely Mirka. Since Miranda never said about Mirka that she was hungry, the report comes out false.

It is important to realize is that the falsity of the report in (6) does not entail that Miranda and Alex have said different things. They said the same thing, I hold, but they said it about different people: Miranda said it about Sergeï, and Alex, about Mirka. Since the reporter does not make it explicit that different people were talked about, the report in (6) is implicitly taken to concern the same person as (5), hence it is implicitly interpreting as reporting Miranda to have said *about Mirka* that she was hungry. This account is further supported by the fact that if the reporter specifies the person about whom Miranda said what she said, the report becomes correct:<sup>5</sup>

(7) That's what Miranda said, too, about Sergeï.

## §5. How it works

Let me end the paper by applying the proposal to the cases discussed in Sect. 1 to 3. It will help to first try to flesh out my proposal somewhat more formally. Let  $u_1$  and  $u_2$  be any two utterances of the form <noun phrase – verb phrase>. Then:

(i)  $u_1$  and  $u_2$  assert the same content (= say the same thing) if and only if

the same property is predicated by the respective verb phrases of  $u_1$  and  $u_2$ ;

(ii)  $u_1$  and  $u_2$  may be correctly reported as saying the same thing if and only if:

(a) they say the same thing in the sense of (i), and:

(b) what is said is self-asserted by the speakers of  $u_1$  and  $u_2$ , or:

(b') what is said is asserted *de facto* about one and the same thing or individual,

or else:

---

<sup>5</sup> My account allows for cases in which the report can be correct even if the person talked about is not explicitly specified, provided that the context makes it clear enough that a different person was talked about. Here is a tentative example. Suppose that Sergeï and Alex had a blind date each on Saturday evening. On Sunday, when Mirka asks him how it went, Sergeï tells her, "She was obnoxious." Later, Alex, talking about his own date, tells Mirka, "She was obnoxious." Mirka may then correctly reply "Sergeï said that, too." The reason why, unlike (6), the report is perceived as correct, is that the context makes it clear that Sergeï must have been talking *of his own date* when he said that she was obnoxious.

(b'') the reporter makes it explicit, or the context makes it sufficiently clear,  
about what (or whom) what is said is asserted.

< I then show how my account predicts the ambiguity in reports such as (13), plus  
some remarks on the advantages of my account over Kaplanian accounts, perhaps  
some remarks on how my account differs from Lewis's account of *de se* attitudes. >

## References

- Crimmins, M. and J. Perry. (1989). "The Prince and the Phone-Booth: Reporting  
Puzzling Beliefs." *Journal of Philosophy* 86: 685-711.
- Feldman, R. (1980). "Saying Different Things." *Philosophical Studies* 38: 79-84.
- Frege, G. (1899). "Logic." *The Frege Reader*. Ed. K. Beaney. Oxford: Blackwell (1997).  
227-250.
- Kaplan, D. (1989). "Demonstratives". *Themes from Kaplan*. Eds. J. Almog et al. Oxford:  
Oxford UP. 481-563.
- Lewis, D. (1980). "Index, Content and Context." *Philosophy and Grammar*. Eds. S.  
Kanger & S. Ohman. Dordrecht: Reidel.
- (1981). "Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*." *The Philosophical Review* 88: 513-43.
- Stojanovic, I. (2007). *What Is Said: an Inquiry into Reference, Meaning and Content*. PhD  
dissertation, Stanford University.
- (2008). "Talking about Taste: Disagreement, Implicit Arguments and Relative  
Truth", forthcoming in *Linguistics and Philosophy*.
- Ziff, P. (1972.) "What is Said." *Natural Language Semantics*. Eds. D. Davidson and G.  
Harman. Dordrecht: Reidel. 709-21.