

The Intersubjectivity of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ Tokens in Communication: Moving Between Represented Subjectivity and Conceptual Objectivity

MELINDA Y. CHEN
University of California, Berkeley

It is a fact both original and fundamental that these “pronominal” forms do not refer to “reality” or to “objective” in space or time but to the utterance, unique each time, that contains them.... The importance of their function will be measured by the nature of the problem they serve to solve, which is none other than that of intersubjective communication. Language has solved this problem by creating an ensemble of “empty” signs that are nonreferential, with respect to “reality”. (Benveniste 1966:219)

How is a person subjectified through language, as an ongoing repository for the endowment of subjectlike qualities? When, and for whom, does one’s own represented subjectivity slide into the “subjective objectivity” of an intersubjective reality? And what does it mean for this to happen linguistically?

This paper examines the interpretation of tokens of ‘self’ and ‘other’ with a focus on the interplay between cognitive semantics and (intersubjective) interaction, warns against imputing fixity to pronominal referents, and explores dynamics of meaning production vis-à-vis subjectivity. In the coming discussion, *I* and *you* are traced in a tradeoff of insults. Crucial is the idea that two minds cross over shared objects – as well as the fact that in an insult exchange, an assumption shared by the speakers is that viewpoints are heterogeneous rather than identical, and representations of selves may be at stake.¹ A mental spaces framework provides a way to represent not only conceptual representations that are the preeminent constituents of linguistic meaning, but diverse other aspects of interaction – intersubjective awareness, indexing, and identity types – without sacrificing systematicity.² My theoretical departure is Benveniste’s insightful work on

¹ Identity, so complex it often seems ungraspable, once grounded in cognition and seen as a matter of representation, serves as an excellent focal point for explorations of intersubjective meaning produced on-the-fly.

² Mental Spaces Theory (Fauconnier 1994, 1997, and others), or MST, is a general theory of conceptual meaning which postulates the dynamic change of conceptual structure in response to a conceptualizer’s interactions with entities “in the world”, whether or not this involves language

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pronouns, which can be expanded and revised for a modern cognitive linguistics context.

Language is constitutionally intersubjective. Lexical meaning is never quite owned by one specific person, and yet such meaning is only human (rather than objective) in some crucial sense; hence that meaning is continuously shared among (linguistic) agents. It is also useful to note that these sharings are often the result of a power struggle; they must, sometimes literally, be negotiated, between or “inter-subjects”. While the language being negotiated is implicitly shared, the viewpoints around which it is negotiated may well be antagonistic. Let us then consider intersubjectivity in its complex nature: doing language involves shared communication between two neurally, culturally, and cognitively heterogeneous agents who will (whether consciously or not) be at odds in a number of ways.

If conservative about the givenness of information about an interlocutor, we might depict one such interlocutor’s mental space configuration for their conversational situation as in Figure 1 below.³ This is a continually managed, intersubjective configuration of mental spaces, any of which might serve as a *focus space* and hence be modified in content. Such a multiplicity of spaces suggests there is room for all kinds of inferencing. At the same time, potentially adversarial conditions do not completely divest participants of collaborative meaning-making. This collaboration is partly manifested in the sense that there are inherent constraints to interpretation – such as the prioritized use of a particular set of mental spaces. That is, there may be interpretative complexity, but intersubjective awareness ensures a certain amount of cooperation. As for how to sort through this complexity, I explore later how perspectivization (indication of a particular viewpoint as a source for information) may be explicitly or implicitly signalled.

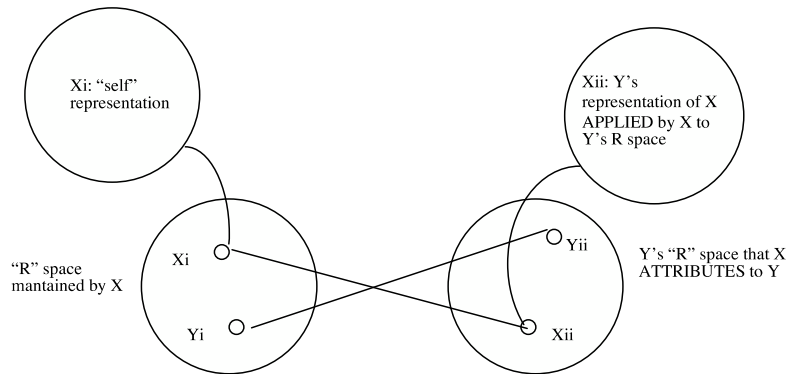
activity. MST is apt for integrating much information understood to be classically pragmatic, and has offered advantageous explanations for a number of classic pragmatic-semantic problems.

The mental space is a construct representing any packaged organization of information in cognition. Only distantly related to classical semantics’ “possible world”, it comprises a diversity of conceptual information, such as entities and frames. Informed by context, schematic or skeletal spaces become enriched and particularized. Conceptualizers at minimum maintain a “real” space R, in which the current interaction’s participants and relationships (if they are available) are installed. Upon this base, utterances constitute streams of cues for constrained conceptual development. Anaphoric or other pronominal references (*she, that cat*) either make use of existing correspondences between spaces’ elements, or generate new ones. Space builders are another type of cue: for instance, “is” revises a current, or Focus, space; “believes” creates a new Belief space; “was” and “before” create Past-Time spaces.

³ My thanks go to Kevin Wiliarty for this lucid configuration, which is useful for the exposition. I am fully responsible for any errors.

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Figure 1: Intersubjectivity in Conversation: a Four-Space Representation of Interaction and Identity Maintained by One Interlocutor (X)



The following two hypothetical exchanges between a waiter and customer in an eating establishment differ just enough to illustrate a distinction. The conversational context is accounted for by a *RESTAURANT* frame, where a certain power configuration – which is relevant to the playing-out of collaborative, intersubjective meaning – is partly manifest in the roles of server and served, and in scripts for the proper interactive behavior of each participant. Because I lack the space to draw progressive mental spaces imagery, instead I record the conceptualization events prompted by explicit linguistic cues, as well as the inference production likely to result.

Exchange 1: Insult (without resistance).

<p>DIALOGUE</p> <p>a = customer b = waiter</p>	<p>MENTAL SPACE EVENTS</p> <p>Ia a's self-representation in space Ra; Ib b's self-representation in space Rb; YOUa a's representation of b in space Ra; YOUb b's representation of a in space Rb. ⇒ indicates inference production.</p>
<p>(1) a: HEY, I said I didn't want tomatoes on my burger!</p>	<p>[Ia=said[Ia=didn't want tomatoes on burger]] ⇒ Iapast=don't want tomatoes</p>
<p>(2) b: I thought you wanted tomatoes.</p>	<p>[Ib=thought[YOUb=wanted tomatoes]] YOUbpastbelief=want tomatoes. Iapast != YOUbpastbelief; two MS must be maintained. Iapast: don't want tomatoes Ibpastbelief: YOUb=want tomatoes</p>

(3) a: Well, I DIDn't... [pause] you're obviously a numbskull.	[Ia=didn't want tomatoes] reconfirms viewpoint MS-Ia, viewpoint a in a's R space (reconfirms R space) [YOUa=numbskull] from this viewpoint, depicts YOUa. YOUa has no conflict with Ib. If Ib's thought=mistake (customer is always right, at least more powerful), Ib "deserves" the label! Ib's belief != a's R space; Ib=wrong; Ib=numbskull.
(4) b: Hey, I'm sorry.	[Ib=sorry] Ib=sorry. ⇒ Ib concedes culpability.
(5) a: Yeah... well, you can try doing your job next time, maybe.	[YOUa=can try doing job next time] ⇒ YOUa doesn't do job

Here A promulgates his own offensive representation of B. If power relationships are such that A is afforded more "meaning authority" in the local context (he is here), then both A and B know that A's reality has extra purchase in some sense.⁴ B's own *I* representation may well differ from A's (unless B already holds, or is susceptible to, negative self-representations), in which case it points to an alternative representation of *I*. In a more implicit case, A's characterization of B paints A's representation of B, and B's defense paints B's representation of B. These characterizations can be implicitly made.

In the second example – Exchange 1's complement of a sort – instead of (4) above, we see active resistance on the part of the waiter in (9):

Exchange 2: Insult (with resistance)

(6)-(8): see (1)-(3) above	
(9) b: Dude, NUMBskulls are those people like yourSELF who avoid healthy foods.	(Redefines numbskulls to fit a) [numbskulls=avoid healthy foods] ⇒ YOUb=eats hamburgers ⇒ YOUb=avoids healthy foods ⇒ YOUb=numbskull ⇒ Ib eats healthy foods ⇒ Ib is not a numbskull [Ib=NOT numbskull] now arouses conflict with YOUa. Mental spaces disassociate/de-link. [YOUb=numbskull; YOUb=unhealthy; Ib=eat healthy foods; Ib=NOT numbskull] MS for Ib is: Ib's thought=mistake; Ib=NOT numbskull; Ib=eat healthy foods; MS for YOUb=numbskull; YOUb=unhealthy

⁴ On my use of "meaning authority": The concept is certainly more complex than to be monolithically granted to one interlocutor for the full course of the interchange. For more reading on such issues, see (Butler, *Excitable Speech*, and Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*).

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There are two ways in which the waiter can be understood to resist the application of the label *numbskull* (as well as, more generally, the exercise of power that accompanies the utterance). First, the waiter redefines *numbskull* by referring to a type that apparently includes his interlocutor (people who avoid healthy foods). This act also invites the inference that his own equation with the label *numbskull* must be incorrect. Until the customer has a chance to respond, the waiter has momentarily exercised a limited meaning authority.

Given that reality is not objective, it can be contested, and power helps determine whose representations win. In a conceptualist theory, reality is fundamentally treated as a matter of representation.⁵ That is, for each language interpreter, a reality space R – again, recall, informed by schemas, idealized or stereotypical models, and details of the immediate context – functions as a base within which, and from which, meaning itself is constructed. But what informs R may well shift: Whose contribution wins is precisely what gets differing distributions in the two exchanges above. For instance, the resistive waiter wrests, in (9), a kind of authority over the shared portion of Reality space, as a consequence of the collaborative conversation (a la Grice) presumed to minimally exist, and set his terms – literally – upon it. Note that it is highly possible that a given R space is at times assumed to be shared – that is, that all participants possess in some sense the same “subjective objectivity”.⁶ Objective facts or truths reach this status precisely because the group that shares these facts or truths concur on their meaning. I later discuss the ways that power relations, and variations in egocentric orientation, can affect what is inferred as objective.

How do interaction and semantics work together in the exchanges above? To review the technology of the pronouns themselves, Benveniste, in “The Nature of Pronouns”, distinguished the 1st and 2nd person pronouns (presumably true for all languages) from 3rd person pronouns in the following way: *I* and *you* mean no more and no less than that one who is either speaking or being addressed at the moment of the utterance (1966). Further, it is precisely *I* that allows an individual speaking subject into being. Thus, while the *I* and *you* pronouns seem to afford crucial means for the represented experience (and hence the enabling) of personhood and subjectivity, they also, almost paradoxically, index that same subject.

With Benveniste’s strict and entirely appropriate delimitations about the meanings of 1st and 2nd person pronouns in mind, I make below some specific claims regarding the possibilities of over-imputing fixity to the entities (language objects and referents alike) associated with the semantics of these pronouns. I address two possible erroneous inferences: first, that the interlocutors serving as

⁵ I do not mean to imply that this representation exists devoid of embodied, dynamic engagement in the world.

⁶ By subjective objectivity, I mean that both interlocutors are collaboratively compelled to impute a common Reality space, especially in a powered situation when the inferred perspective is automatically accepted as authoritative. Within this space a given element effectively reaches the status of objectivity, though its evaluation may well have subjective origins and can certainly be attributed to human cognators.

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referents to the pronouns are essentially fixed; and second, that *I/you* point to unitary bodies or subjects. In reality, the interlocutors are both always present and being shaped at the time of speaking, partially by the speech; furthermore, the process of shaping is not exhaustively applied to “the subject”, but rather operates on selected aspects of subjectivity.⁷

It is easy enough to imagine an objectified, intellected body of information, separate from the interlocutors, which is being discussed. This is effectively to fix the interlocutors as constant, external elements, beyond the inclusive reach of regular conceptualization. What makes the fixity a tempting default for practitioners and conversationalists alike is the possibility of a kind of teleological overflow, outpacing the borders of what is definitional fixedness. It is only as indexical elements without objective content that *I/you* can fairly be seen to possess fixed semantics. Note, however, that even if they are purely indexical, *what* they index is potentially mobile, precisely because in the process of indexing the entity itself is being (conceptually) shaped. *I/you* do not simply refer the expression to an aspect of the context. They actively *create* that context by pointing in some sense to what needs to be modified. Thus a real indeterminacy lurks beneath the seeming fixity of *I/you* as index-functional lexical items. In sum, then, the limited semantics of the person deictics in no way ontologically secures what it says nothing about.

Also supporting the possible imputation of ontological fixity are interpreters' belief in object constancy, or, on a more particular human scale, identity permanence (defined as “the understanding that the same person is very different at different times in his or her life, but is nonetheless ‘the same’”, Sweetser and Fauconnier 1996), and the belief in a consistent self.⁸ But given the insistent dynamism of what we understand consciously and unconsciously to be reality, constancy in meaning must exist alongside changes in other meaning. Applied to the interlocutors behind the pronouns, this means that the fluidity of the interlocutors' very complex identities themselves must also be taken into account. Recall that Benveniste has written that pronouns allow us to assign characteristics – subjectivity – to those involved in conversation; in fact, such is the precise means of achieving subjecthood (Benveniste 1966).

The *belief* in the durativity of the *I*, ironically, plays a role quite opposite to that of fixing the *I*. The *belief* in the durativity of the *I* is what enables the actual

⁷ A double edge inheres in the concept of “ground”. Grounding might easily be thought as that fixed system of relatively intersubjectively stable reference points by which we may, somehow, fix or specify a conceptualization. But the degree which we may think of *I* and *you* as “given” aspects of the ground seems highly variable. The mental spaces and cognitive grammar frameworks both seem to have made presumptions of givenness from time to time, but *I* and *you* may only really be maximally fixed as part of an idealized, schematic conversational speaker/hearer template.

⁸ The relation between object constancy and conceptual representation of the object, I suggest, may be analogized to the relation between an idealized cognitive model and the messier reality of actual linguistic behavior.

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meaning of *I* to assume a gradual development, rather than enjoying life and death at every moment. It is what gives us an ongoing (conceptual) trace which is subject to modification. For the conceptualist view, then, Benveniste's time-sliced reality of discourse (286), with validity (of the *use* of *I*) restricted to the moment, needs complementation with the belief that there is a consistency of self (of the *meaning* of *I*).

With regard to the possible inference about unitary referents, Ronald Langacker has taken the position that interlocutors are perhaps *always* an implicit presence in the conceptualizations, no matter the object. In discussing the interlocutors' role in being the afforders of meaning, he argues that the figure of the speaking subject, *S*, inheres in some way ("at least peripherally") in every element's encyclopedic semantic value, whether or not this has been conventionalized in terms of a templatic subjectivity. And "at the very least there is always an implicit conceptualizing presence" (Langacker 1997). Thus an interlocutor is present in two ways: first, as explored above, as conceptualized individuals endowed with character by virtue of the use of the "pointing" pronouns; and second, as overseeing conceptualizers for every instantiation of meaning. While the degree of onstage-offstageness is in constant flux, there is no reason not to think that our ongoing cognitive tasks include "writing the right information to the right blend" – meaning that we must find ways to integrate (in the form of a cognitive blend) the overseeing-conceptualizer of the last utterance with the *you* of the present one, and so forth.

Each interlocutor, then, is itself a blend, between a subject whose conceptualizing capacity is profiled, and an individual continually embellished with the characteristics of the propositions in which the pronouns *I* and *you* have been embedded.⁹ Theoretically, we have assumed that interlocutors do not implicitly appear in a conceptualization (see Goffman 1959, Sanders and Spooren 1997). And yet *conceptual presence* is essential: language is what we do. This means that we are forever being conceptually shaped, however implicitly and in the background, beyond conscious awareness this may be.¹⁰

Now we must address the mechanisms of the conceptual shifting behind the imagined fixed self. There is a subtlety to what it is that *I* and *you* do, that moves beyond the simple creating-indexing duality. So far I have said that these pronouns serve as pointers to conceptualizations of interlocutors that are being

⁹ It is also worth noting that the cognitive representation of the *interlocutor* and that of the participating *subject* necessarily coexist in a blend.

¹⁰ The conceptualist account above suggests that deictics (including the *I/you* pronouns), though they do have a necessity requirement for reference to the immediate instance of discourse, cannot by nature be so *radically* distinct from other utterable constructions. It might be more reasonable to think of them as so radically installed at one end of a graded scale along a certain semantic dimension (in this case that they refer almost templatically to the local conversational context), that, for instance, "you" simply cannot be cited except in an explicitly citational construction ("She said 'You scum'"), or, perhaps, only with dramatic help of prosody, emphasis, and other constructional disambiguators (perspectivizers).

enriched by the current discourse. Subjectivity itself, (as identity) is in some very real sense an indivisible and highly variable and individualized mass of subject qualities.¹¹ Would *I/you* then simply refer unvaryingly to this rather monstrous, gestalt unity: the pan-subjective representation of an interlocutor? From the perspective of the mind-in-action, while a seeming infinitude of interpretations of *I* are possible, it would be implausible for a conceptual instantiation to include all aspects of subjectivity at once, at equal degrees of salience. Rather, the conditions of salience and schematic representation must still apply. What are our alternatives, then?

One alternative is offered by the specificity of cognitive domains. In encyclopedic cognitive semantics, every lexical item is understood to evoke a number of possible relevant cognitive domains. There is no reason to exclude the “special” case of pronouns from this phenomenon. In this view, then, in context *I/you* should simply alert some array of relevant subjective qualities (judgment, attitude, emotion, physical being, spirit, and so on). But what reason have we to believe, besides applying a vague principle of cognitive economy, that subjectivity is organized in our representations such that we deal with subtypes, rather than wholes, of subjectivity?

The grammaticalization literature has demonstrated several structured ways that specific domains of subjectivity – and not others – are called up upon certain lexical appeals to the subject. For example, the verb *promise* can indicate either deontic (*Jerry promises*) or epistemic modality (*the economy promises*). While the former remains relatively objective and externalized, the latter indicates the attitude of the speaker – certainly a domain of subjectivity. Similarly, in *I think*, the judging (or attitudinal) subject is brought up. In *I am happy*, *I* alerts many possible subjectivities, but in the utterance context, emotional domains are alerted, and thus the affective subject is profiled.

Some discursive contexts represent domains of convention that lend a deictic such as *I* an extremely narrow zone of application (narrow to the momentary reality of discourse). Consider our everyday reliance on hugely schematic role representations to support the interactions we have with people who work and live in our communities; these representations concern specific capacities and not others. Further, given that each social being possesses multiple identities/identifications, if these are available to the shared reality, any of these, too, may be indexed. Jo Rubba (1996) has shown how idealized cognitive models impinge upon more “objective-world” factors in language production. Lakoff’s (1996) account of the interpretation of *I dreamt I was Brigitte Bardot and that I kissed me* involves a necessary, conventionalized partitioning of self into “(thinking,

¹¹ Finegan (1995) writes that it is precisely **because subjectivity is the “expression of self and the representation of a speaker’s ... perspective or point of view in discourse – what has been called a speaker’s imprint....” that it has a multitude of meanings and instantiations. Subjectivity itself is not so limited or systematized as grammatical subjecthood, but “central to emerging views of discourse – to the intersection of language structure and language use in the expression of self”.**

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judging) subject” and “(corporeal) self”. Thus, despite its kaleidoscopic nature, *as we understand it* subjectivity has been conventionalized and typed in functionally, socially, significant ways.

Finally, perhaps the most convincing evidence comes from the role that conversational implicature plays in semantic change: we would not be able to infer, much less consistently lexicalize, particular senses or attitudes (aspects of subjectivity) into a lexical meaning *unless* we were able to abstract (and quite effortlessly) from the infinite variety of specific cognitive states that could plausibly accompany a previously “objective” utterance. In sum, then, it is highly plausible that specific domains of subjectivity will be indexed, or alerted, by an *I*. Thus mentions of the pronoun are nothing other than an invitation to *consider* the subjectivity associated with the pronoun (1st or 2nd person, either interlocutor) in association with the proposition offered in the surrounding utterance.

Returning to the contentious nature of the exchange in the example, we are now in a position to describe certain identitarian risks in interaction. If, as in encyclopedic cognitive semantics, the speaking subject, *S*, inheres in every element’s semantic value, then it can only be true that we, as interlocutors, in playing a part in the conceptualizations brought up, are always both subjects and objects of conception. This is most evident in the case of *I* and *you*. When I say *I was attacked by a dog last night*, I place myself on-stage, as the experiencer of a dog attack. To my addressee, I may therefore be objectified – observed at a notional distance, highly available as an object of contemplation. When our selves become of concern – which is particularly the case in uncomfortable or marked social situations (rather than unmarked ones; see Goffman 1959) such as insult exchanges – then we begin to play games of representation. The utterance context surrounding the use of *I* informs the subjectivity thus involved and goes “on record”, whether it is an attitude that can go on record without deep inferencing, or a short-lived statement of attitude that quickly fades. Whatever the “private” stabilities of the identities involved in the interlocution, both participants must fend with the existence of an eminently alienable representation of themselves that resides in the shared, public sphere.

To play out those possible risks and how they emerge, we address the possibility of *implicit* perspectivization, which underlies much of what can be sneakily harmful in discourse with regard to identity, and hence is relevant here. Spaces or elements representing *you*, *I*, *you think I*, and so on, are implicit in any conversational context, but particularly an adversarial one. In orthodox MST, *you think* makes *Y*’s *R* space the focus space. However, it is my contention that while there are biasing constraints, still any of these spaces can serve as a focus space, whether by explicit marking or not. Though Sanders and Spooren (1997) claim that the egocentric perspective is the default unless shifting is invited explicitly, much of this can be done implicitly.

Awareness of intersubjectivity is essential to the ability to perspectivize, and in fact, it is one condition obliging us to afford perspectivization to utterances that may not be explicitly marked. Once we abstract away from a physicalist model of

perspective (of the type that seems to underlie Langacker's analyses of objectivity and subjectivity), other phenomena, such as affective frames, and value judgments, and different instantiations of the conceptualized "object" come into play. I have already recounted Langacker's claim that every conceptualized element has at least a minimal schematic representation of a conceptualizer included within it. In some sense, this is the foundation for the awareness of the intersubjective nature of meaning, however below the level of outright consciousness this may lie.¹² Polite exchanges, and implicitly perspectivizable utterances, can be seen as involving processes of meaning that may be characterized as predominantly rhetorical rather than strictly semantic in a traditional sense.

How is this perspectivization afforded? If we follow the traces of the discourse, we could go so far as to say that, even if *I/you* are indexical, they still may nevertheless be relatively subjectified (if by the speaker) and objectified (for the hearer). For instance, a presumed relative conceptual objectivity is broken when the unsuspecting subject suddenly comes to suspect and subjectifies the *you* that was spoken to him or her. In Exchange 2, B has wisely perspectivized the labeling of him as a *numbskull*, rather than accepting it as part of the subjective objectivity space being built. Thus, B does not seek to correct a characterization of *him* that has been planted there, but rather chooses not to "see" his place in it at all – instead, the only common entity he purports to address is the meaning of *numbskull* – the real contest. Thus in this kind of direct and indirect insult, perspectivization works to flag certain spaces, with certain potentially invested contents, as the "shared", and hence "subjectively objective" reality space. Conditions of power and authority – in the form of who, a priori, gets automatic control of the intersubjective reality space, but also, no less in the form of what statements are allowed, play a crucial role in determining which spaces are available for assigning meaning.

The explanation of meaning processes in insult exchanges is not trivial because much of it happens implicitly, and hence passes under the scope of explicit linguistics. When we consider other domains in which self- and other- representations might be invoked with some kind of investment in the discourse, insult emerges as a particularly brusque, self-evident, and self-alerting genre. There are other, subtler contestations of identity – or manipulations of identity – which do not so perceptibly burst the social rules. As we can see even in the first exchange, at a certain point B realizes that his *I* cannot quite jibe with the other's *you* representations, so that one space must in effect be disassociated into two, where it was not previously necessary. Interlocutor B in exchange 1 has perhaps realized at some point that he has played a part in a denigration of himself without knowing it (because he did not immediately think to contradict it, and so it stood). Verbal

¹² Langacker (1997) writes: "[I]n a speech event... each participant's construal of the situation includes the fact that the other also apprehends it in a certain manner; how the situation is to be viewed and portrayed therefore constitutes a major portion of what the interlocutors have to negotiate."

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passive-aggression counts as another relatively subtle form. Whether the aggression is verbal or psychological, there is conceived to be a certain force working between the agents indicated by *I* and *you*. Are, in this case, the representations indexed by one's *I* and the other's *you* shared intersubjectively? Perhaps relatively more so in this case than in the insult case, provided that in the insult case there is the possibility for explicit, discernible resistance. Insult is by no means the unique holder of identitarian contests. It is the explicit relationship between meaning and interaction that distinguishes these contests.

In sum, the two simple argumentative dialogues have suggested some interesting points:

- New space generation can arise from conflict inhering in representations of the participating subjects.
- Different subjectivities (kinds of subjectivity) are being "indexed".
- The great schematicity of *I/you* does not prevent them from being associated with, or evoking, certain durative local meanings, by referring and/or modifying existing mental spaces. On the one hand: "semantics" (just an index) leaks into "meaning" (for participants, *I* "means" something in between the *I* in the discourse and the *I* at the moment of speaking); and yet the semantics remains secure and self-limiting precisely because it allows for the indexing process to account for changing representations as well.
- The participation of both interlocutors in the negotiation of meaning cannot be opted out of, unless the conversation itself is abandoned; however, within the interaction the authority of meaning-making may well be asymmetric at any given point in time. Certainly the explicit and implicit differentials of power inhering in any conversational situation make this a likelihood, albeit one that may manifest subtly.

One of the major insights owed to sociology and subsequent work in sociolinguistics is that it is by language that persons construct their identities. And if we see the *I* as the purest linguistic tool, or, better, indirect agent, of our own subject representations, taking Benveniste to heart, then we must acknowledge that this construction happens largely through these pronouns, and hence that the entity indexed by *I* is itself necessarily mobile, undetermined. The main question to answer, then, is to what degree, for each interlocutor, potentially disparate aspects of one's identity come to bear on the discourse at hand, and whether we can be satisfied in saying that a criterion of relevance is sufficient for a full explanation of the semantics of an utterance.

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Melinda Y. Chen
Department of Linguistics, UC Berkeley
1203 Dwinelle Hall
Berkeley, CA 94720-2650

melc@socrates.berkeley.edu