Appeals to context are inevitable in any theory of meaning for natural language. A survey of views on the meanings of context-sensitive expressions in Mill, Russell, Frege, Peirce and Husserl reveals both the pivotal role played by context in the overall theory of singular reference, but also the paucity of explicit attention to what context must be and how it must function to fulfill that role—specifically to explain both the objectivity and cognitive significance of indexical reference. Explicit accounts of context in recent philosophy of language, e.g., in Kaplan, Perry and Recanati, are then canvased and found to be only partially adequate. Finally, a positive account of the structure and dynamics of indexical context is offered. Context is described as an intersubjective cognitive space containing linguistic agents and objects of potential reference. The agents are characterized by specific competencies, including communicative role-playing, attention to and evaluation of common objects, and empathic anticipation of perspectival shifts. The objects are characterized by relevance, i.e. pragmatic value relative to goals and projects of the agents. Context of this kind is held to be grounded in the basic intentional processes which characterize human consciousness, and the ability to exploit context for communicative purposes
is held to develop as a cognitive faculty along with syntactic competence in the normal process of language acquisition. It is argued that this account adequately fulfills the desiderata for a theory of context implicit in the traditional theoretical agenda of the philosophy of language.