

Varieties Of Anaphora

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Abstract: This article discusses varieties of anaphora. Anaphora has been identified with a limited set of words, but in the past decades there have been many proposals to interpret other phenomena as anaphora. While most people would agree that these phenomena are context-dependent, the claim that they belong to one and the same class, namely anaphora is much more controversial.

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Traditionally, anaphora have been identified with a limited set of words (pronouns such as 'he', 'they', ...), but in the past decades there have been many proposals to interpret other phenomena as anaphora.

So what is anaphora? In fact, answering this question is more difficult than one would think. As an illustration of this, compare the following two, more or less randomly chosen definitions. Reinhart (1999) claims that: "The term anaphora is used most commonly in theoretical linguistics to denote any case where two nominal expressions are assigned the same referential value or range."

Anaphora is the special case of cohesion where the meaning of one item in a cohesive relationship is, in isolation, somehow vague or incomplete, and can only properly be interpreted by considering the meanings of the other items in the relationship."

Notice that all phenomena mentioned above fall within the scope of this definition. Furthermore, this definition takes into account the fact that there is a relation of dependency between the anaphor and the antecedent. However, the definition is arguably too general. As van Deemter points out, according to Carter's definition the phenomenon of contextual disambiguation is anaphoric as well. Although certain forms of contextual disambiguation (e.g., the resolution of pronouns) are classical examples of anaphora, there are other forms of contextual disambiguation which are traditionally not thought of in terms of anaphora, e.g., word sense disambiguation. In the sense of the word 'bank' is most likely perceived to be that of a financial institution. This interpretation appears to be induced by the direct linguistic context ("needed some cash") and yet we hesitate to say that therefore the word 'bank' is an anaphor.

John needed some cash so he went to a bank.

Unfortunately, in the literature there exists no consensus about what the properties are. To our knowledge, all of the proposed definitions have been subjected to criticism of one of the following two types: (A) It is argued that a particular property is not a necessary property of anaphorically used expressions (e.g., that the expression should be nominal, as required by the definition given under 1). This involves contesting the 'only if' part of the definition. (B) It is argued that the properties in the definition are not sufficient (e.g., another criticism of the definition under 1. is that coreferentiality is not a sufficient property for anaphoricity). This involves questioning the 'if' part of the definition.

The prospects for finding an unequivocal answer to the question 'what is anaphora?' appear to be rather bleak. However, the fact that we can break a definition down into the properties which it uses provides us with a handle for examining the notion of anaphora: instead of trying to compare entire definitions with each other, we can systematically look at the properties which have been associated with anaphora and discuss the pros and

cons of them. Thus, we may not obtain an unequivocal answer to the question ‘what is anaphora?’. However, we can hope to gain a better insight into why particular phenomena are considered anaphora by some and not by others. Below we briefly discuss a number of proposed ‘characteristic properties’ of anaphora. To wit:

- the contextual dependency of interpreting anaphors;
- the type of antecedent;
- the location of the antecedent;
- the type of relation between anaphor and antecedent;
- structural constraints on the relation between anaphor and antecedent;
- the range of interpretations the anaphor allows for.

Type of Antecedent The item on which the anaphor depends for its interpretation is called the antecedent. Very different types of items have been considered to be antecedents:

1. Linguistics expressions, e.g. full noun phrases;
2. Representations of objects. These representations can be thought of as theoretical constructs or models of the mental representations which hearers employ when interpreting a discourse
3. Objects in the real world, in particular, that part of the world in which the communication takes place, i.e., the utterance situation.

On a strict interpretation of anaphora, only expressions which depend for their interpretation on linguistically realized antecedents are proper anaphora. In particular, when an expression relies on the utterance situation, we speak of deixis instead of anaphora. But again, a more loose interpretation of anaphora has been advocated. In particular, Partee suggests that it is characteristic of nominal anaphora that they allow for non-linguistic antecedents.

Type of Relation We have already seen that it has been claimed that an anaphor and its antecedent are coreferential. Unfortunately, coreference does not seem to be a necessary property of anaphora. Consider:

A few of the prisoners managed to escape, but they didn’t get very far

According to Kibble and Van Deemter, expressions such as ‘A few of the prisoners’, ‘Most prisoners’, ‘A prisoner’ are strictly speaking nonreferring: these expressions are normally not used to single out one or more real world individuals. Therefore they can impossibly be coreferential with some other expression. And yet in our example, ‘A few of the prisoners’ seems to be the antecedent for ‘they’. In other words, ‘they’ is anaphoric. These considerations lead to the conclusion that coreference cannot be a property of anaphora. This conclusion, however, hinges on the assumption that we speak of coreference on the level of real-world individuals: two expressions are coreferential if their real world referents are identical. Alternatively, we can adopt a notion of coreference which applies to individuals on the level of mental representations. In that case, it seems valid to say that ‘A few of the prisoners’ and ‘they’ are coreferential: the expressions refer to the same discourse referent.

One of the first systematic studies of the constraints on the relation between antecedents and anaphors is Karttunen. Karttunen provides a characterization of when an indefinite noun phrase can function as the antecedent of a pronoun.

In this article, we have discussed a collection of potential properties of anaphora and attempted to fit them into a number of natural groups. A common thread of all these readings is that they employ some form of Discourse Representation Theory as a framework to formalize and examine the properties of anaphora. For the reader who is unfamiliar with DRT, an introduction can be found in the chapter immediately following this one

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