

Reinterpreting anaphora: towards ambiguity-first approach

The natural language has many theoretically puzzling features. Among them there is the ability of the language users to refer to different objects (such as things, people, animals, but also moments in time or places) by using certain words. Let us consider the following sentence:

(1) Mary stayed at the party until very late, but Sue left early.

By uttering (1) I refer to Mary, by using her name, and to Sue, also by using her name. Expressions which have the potential to be used in such a way that they refer to certain objects are called referential expressions. This class of expression consists not only of proper names, but also descriptions (I could refer to Sue as “Mary’s friend”) and pronouns, among others. Let us consider another example:

(2) Mary stayed at the party until very late, but Sue left early. She was really angry upon leaving.

It is intuitively clear that in (2) “she” refers to Sue. The questions that theories of anaphora seek the answer to is how does it happen that “she” refers to Sue and how does the meaning of fragments of discourse such as (2) should be conceptualised in a formal and systematic way. It is also those questions that this project seeks an answer to.

The working hypothesis that will be investigated and developed in this project is that the interpretation of sentences like “She was really angry upon leaving.” in (2) is in fact a two-step process. The first step is interpreting any sentence containing anaphoric expressions as ambiguous, the second step is the (eventual) disambiguation. Since “she” in this context is an anaphoric expression, it is given that it refers to some object that has been introduced in the conversation previously. However, it is not immediately clear to which one. There have been at least two objects introduced into this conversation, Mary and Sue, and “she” could potentially refer to any of them. Yet, for some reasons, we are more inclined to decide that “Sue” is the intended referent. This is why many theories of anaphora do not leave much room for this ambiguity and assume (2) to have unambiguous reading. This project challenges this assumption.

The first step of the research will be to thoroughly examine different theories of anaphora and see if there is a place for ambiguous readings of anaphora in them. If not, it is important to see if those theories can be altered in order to account for such readings or if there is no such possibility due to the fundamental assumptions about how anaphoric reference works. The second step will be to examine the theories which do allow for ambiguous readings and compare the ways which they propose accounting for the disambiguation. Last step will consist in creating a novel formal theory of anaphora based on the desiderata derived from the first two steps of the research. This theory is supposed to provide a uniform treatment of the cases of anaphora which are clearly unambiguous, such as:

(3) Sue left. She was angry.

alongside with the cases of anaphora that have ambiguous readings but are usually easily disambiguated, such as (2) and cases which are bona fide ambiguous, such as:

(4) Sue told Mary that she liked her mother.

The reason why (2), (3) and (4) can all be treated uniformly is that the first step of the interpretation of all three is always the same – they are interpreted as ambiguous – and the differences only arise during the second step of the interpretation, i.e. the disambiguation process.