

Inter-sentential anaphora and coherence relations in discourse: a perfect match

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Abstract

Hobbs [Hobbs, J.R., 1979. Coherence and coreference. *Cognitive Science* 3, 67–90] claims that the interpretation of inter-sentential anaphors ‘falls out’ as a ‘by-product’ of using a particular coherence relation to integrate two discourse units. The article argues that this is only partly true. Taking the reader’s perspective, I suggest that there are three stages in invoking and implementing a given coherence relation to integrate two discourse units when updating a given discourse context. Interleaved with these are two distinguishable levels in the assignment of reference to the anaphor(s) in the second unit: first, through a search for evidence for the appropriateness of a given anticipated relation, the reader will provisionally assign a referent to the anaphor(s) in the second unit via the semantic structure within the relation’s definition (this would correspond to Hobbs’s original thesis); and second, in coming to a final decision as to the applicability of the coherence relation(s), the anaphor(s) will receive a full, expanded interpretation. This in turn will serve to actually implement the coherence relation initially assumed. In more general terms, the article aims to pinpoint the precise nature of the interactions between the invocation and implementation of given coherence relations and the functioning of anaphors in non-initial units, in processing multi-propositional texts.

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1. Introduction

As the title suggests, I am going to deal with the influence of coherence relations (*Cause–Consequence* or *Result*, *Circumstance*, *Claim–Evidence*, *Contrast*, *Elaboration*, *Explanation*, *Occasion*, *Parallel*, etc.) on the way in which anaphora operates and is interpreted in (short) texts. Both coherence relations and anaphoric ones have as their *raison d’être* to facilitate the reader’s or the listener’s task of integrating the contents and discourse values of the incoming clauses of a text into a more global interpretative structure. Both phenomena serve to establish the continuity of meaning and reference without which a sequence of clauses and

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sentences would not be a text. The two discourse procedures will be shown to be in symbiosis one with the other (and so, to constitute ‘a perfect match’). Thus not only does the interpretation (or ‘resolution’) of the anaphor(s) concerned flow naturally from this integrative effort (cf. Hobbs, 1979; Kehler, 2002, 2004), but also the nature of the in-context resolution of the anaphors in subsequent sentences or clauses will actually clinch a coherence relation whose appropriateness may only have been favored by factors associated with the interpretation of the preceding one(s).

Hobbs’s general hypothesis is that once a particular coherence relation has been selected for integrating the propositions and illocutions derived from two adjacent (or non-adjacent) clauses or sentences, in the sense that it can effectively be applied satisfactorily to the relevant units associated with them, then the interpretation of any anaphoric expressions in the second such clause or sentence is ipso facto implemented: ‘The solutions to many problems of reference and coreference simply ‘fall out’ in the course of recognizing the coherence relations’ (Hobbs, 1979, p. 68). No special principles for anaphor resolution need to be invoked, Hobbs claims, over and above those needed for the establishment of a particular coherence relation integrating the contents of the two textual units.

The article aims to show that the full reference of anaphors not only ‘falls out’ of the selection of a given coherence relation to integrate two discourse units: in fact, it is essential for the very implementation of that relation. It further shows that the integration of discourse units in terms of coherence relations and anaphor resolution occurs in three distinguishable stages, rather than in one fell swoop, as Hobbs’s characterization implies. Indeed, the true situation regarding text understanding in terms of coherence relations and anaphora will be shown to be somewhat more complex than is reflected in the account given by Hobbs (1979, 1990). I will be proposing certain modifications of his definitions and classifications of coherence relations, and will attempt to formulate the semantic structure of four further relations, not defined by Hobbs (*Cause–Consequence*, *Circumstance*, *Claim–Evidence* and *Temporal Sequence/Narration*), in terms of his system. Moreover, I will be putting forward a range of factors, not noted as such by Hobbs, that help create the conditions for invoking one or other particular coherence relation – or even more than one simultaneously, on occasion – in order to integrate the content and discourse values of given discourse units.

After a short, preliminary section (Section 2) distinguishing amongst the inter-dependent dimensions of *text*, *context* and *discourse*, Section 3 starts by reanalyzing Hobbs’s (1979) key example presented as illustration of his hypothesis. It then goes on to briefly analyze two short news articles. This makes it possible to give an initial characterization of how particular coherence relations may be invoked to integrate the discourse units isolatable from the text. The discussion includes the formal, textual as well as semantic and encyclopedic cues allowing particular coherence relations to be invoked. Section 4 then examines the theoretical basis of a number of coherence relations, mainly in terms of two relatively recent accounts: those of T. Sanders and his associates and (more centrally) of Hobbs – but references are made throughout to comparable analytic positions adopted by other linguists as well, such as Asher and Lascarides, Kehler, Mann and Thompson, and Roulet. Section 5 analyzes in detail three further English texts (news-in-brief articles) in the light of an augmented version of Hobbs’s (1990) system, in order to put his hypothesis to the test. In doing so, it highlights some of the interactions between the implementation of given coherence relations and the functioning of anaphors of various kinds in understanding these texts. Section 6 concludes the discussion by sketching a processing scenario in which the facts pertaining to these interactions might be incorporated.

2. Text, context and discourse

As a preliminary to the discussion and analyses to come, let us first draw a three-way distinction amongst the dimensions of *text*, *context* and *discourse* (see Table 1 below).

The *text* is the trace of at least one utterance act (whether realized in terms of a verbal, linguistic trace, or of a non-verbal one – which may be gestural, sensorio-perceptual or prosodic). Among the relevant non-verbal signals are nods of the head, winks, gaze direction, pointing gestures, raising of the eyebrows, and so on; and in the written form of language, italics, boldface, underlinings, punctuation and layout generally. *Text*, then, refers to the connected sequences of signs and signals, under their conventional meanings, produced by the speaker and (in informal spoken interactions) by the addressee – certain of which point to possible ways of grounding the discourse to be constructed within a particular context, in cognitive terms. These signals

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