Reference
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Introduction
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Birner’s definition of referring expression

Linguistic perspective on reference

Birner, p. 111

...[A] referring expression is a linguistic form that the speaker uses with the intention that it correspond to some *discourse entity* and bring that discourse entity to mind for the addressee.
What is a discourse entity?

Consider a device designed to read a text in some natural language, interpret it, and store the content in some manner, say, for the purpose of being able to answer questions about it. To accomplish this task, the machine will have to fulfill at least the following basic requirement. It has to be able to build a file that consists of records of all the individuals, that is,

1. events,
2. objects,
3. etc.

mentioned in the text and for each individual record whatever is said about it. Of course, for the time being at least, it seems that such a text interpreter is not a practical idea, but this should not discourage us from studying in abstract what kind of capabilities the machine would have to possess.

Karttunen (1976)
What is a discourse entity?

an individual mentioned in a discourse

As the discourse unfolds, and things are said, we need to be able to keep track of which things are said about which entities. We imagine a discourse file which contains cards for each discourse entity, and as information is added which pertains to that entity, we **update their file card** to include it.
A primitive linguistic act (Basic)

Fred (to Sue): [The dog]_{37} needs to go out.

a. True if and only if the dog Fred is referring to (perhaps their dog, the one they feed and walk every day, dog_{37}) needs to go out.

It doesn’t become true if the neighbor’s dog (dog_{38}) needs to go out.

b. If Sue responds: *What dog?*, it’s felicitous for Fred to say *the dog!* or *that dog!* perhaps accompanying the utterance with a pointing gesture, perhaps emphasized with a little oscillation of the pointing hand.

c. It’s very odd (or at least unhelpful) for Fred to say, “I don’t know.” (“The speaker intends that the referring expression correspond to some discourse entity . . . “)
Birner’s definition of referring expression

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Birner, p. 111

[A] referring expression is a linguistic form that the speaker uses with the intention that it correspond to some discourse entity and bring that discourse entity to mind for the addressee.

Clear cases

a. My brother lives in Sacramento.
b. The dog needs to go out.
c. That is a great car.
d. A blue Buick sideswiped my Chevy.
Clear non-cases

a. The dog *needs to go out*. Generally NPs!
b. A *blue Buick* sideswiped my Chevy.

Indefinites aren’t referring expressions

The speaker *doesn’t* intend that this Buick correspond to some discourse entity. We haven’t been talking about any particular blue Buick. (How do you know?) (b) is true if any blue Buick sideswiped my Chevy. So if Sue responds: *What blue Buick?*, it’s felicitous for Fred to say “I don’t know.” (even if he saw the event but simply doesn’t have any further identifying information).
Problematic cases

1. *The tiger* is a dangerous creature.
2. If you can’t come, *that* will be a shame.
3. *Barbara’s sincerity* is really touching. (Property predicated of Barbara’s sincerity).
4. I can’t decide *what* to eat.
5. *Yesterday* was beautiful. (property predicated of yesterday)
6. I saw my cousin *yesterday*. (something happened at some moment in the course of yesterday)
7. *It’s* rain today. (??)
8. *It’s* John who’s spreading the rumor. (??)
The linguistic problem

What sorts of linguistic constructions cause us to (a) create a new file card? (b) retrieve an existing card from the discourse file to update it?

Anaphora

Pronouns have **antecedents**. That is, they require that there be a discourse entity they can be connected to. We can use pronouns as a test to see whether something is a discourse entity, to see which expressions introduce discourse entities. We look for other kinds of expressions that behave like pronouns.

She has a car.

- It is blue.
- The car is blue.
- A car pulls into the driveway.

She doesn’t have a car.

- * It is blue.
- * The car is blue.
1. *The tiger* is a dangerous creature. Nevertheless, it is vulnerable to COVID-19.

2. If you can’t come, *that* will be a shame. It would make me unhappy. [Complete this exercise: Problem 1]

3. *Barbara's sincerity* is really touching. (Property predicated of Barbara’s sincerity).

4. *Yesterday* was beautiful. It was also rainy.

5. I saw my cousin *yesterday*. *It* was a rainy day. It was raining *then*. (≠ yesterday)

6. *It’s* rain today. *It’s* rain tomorrow too. (Same?)

7. *It’s* John who’s spreading the rumor. *He* was breaking the club rules.
I couldn’t decide what to eat. # It was nutritious.

I knew what to eat. # It was nutritious.

I know what I ate. It was nutritious.
## Second approximation

<table>
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<th>Referring expressions</th>
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More cases with *it*

Hedberg (2000): A scale of increasing "referentiality" (Gundel et al. 1993)

\[ \downarrow \]

"It seems to me you’re wrong."

"It is snowing."

"It was John that I saw."

"It’s not true."

meaningless "pleonasm"

WEATHER it Bolinger (1973)

\[ = \textit{the x that I saw} \]

\[ = \text{the salient proposition (just asserted)} \]
Weather-it. A lexical property? Certain verbs just have dummy subjects? Or does (some of) these *its* stand for a discourse entity?

1. It is cold today. (note time adverbial)
2. It is crowded in here. (note locative adverbial)
3. — What’s it like over there today?
   — It’s holding the same pattern as yesterday.
4. It’s brewing up a tempest
5. It’s so hot that *it*’s giving me a headache.
6. It’s her graduation next week.
Referential v. attributive I

1. Smith’s murderer is insane.
2. The man with the martini glass is a spy.
Smith’s murderer is insane. He as admitted for psychiatric treatment.

Smith’s murderer is insane. I wish I knew who he was.
1. Complete the task of producing the evidence that the NPs on the slide entitled *Evidence for discourse referents* are referring expressions (have discourse referents), using the pronoun test.

2. Translate the following sentence using the approach to indefinites illustrated in example (113), p. 123 of the Birner reading.
   
   *John liked the visitor from Spain.*

3. Questions 11, 15 at the end of Ch.4 in the Birner reading.
Bibliography


Discourse referents.
In *Notes from the linguistic underground*, 363–385. Brill.