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The Question Under Discussion in anaphora resolution

A wide range of phenomena in natural language are semantically incomplete, in the sense that their surface form underdetermines the proposition expressed when used in a given context.

Among these, the following have been extensively studied by linguists and psycholinguists:

- (a) unbound pronouns
- (b) incomplete descriptions
- (c) sluicing and some other types of ellipsis
- (d) domain restriction (including *only*, modals, other quantificational operators)

When we consider isolated sentences involving such phenomena, it is often said that their use gives rise to ambiguity, leaving open more than one interpretation. But in actual use, they are all typically resolved so rapidly and successfully that no awareness of incompleteness, ambiguity or potential anomaly arises.

Three prominent types of accounts have been offered for these phenomena, individually, over the past 40 years. First, all of these phenomena have been held by prominent researchers to involve anaphora. So one approach, drawing on classical accounts of anaphora, looks for antecedent constituents in prior utterances, usually at LF though sometimes in formal structures in discourse; we see this approach most in (a) – (c). A second approach depends on rhetorical relations, an approach especially targeted at the resolution of referential ambiguities involving pronouns and incomplete definites but also at ellipsis resolution in (c). A third posits a central role for the Question Under Discussion (QUD) in constraining the resolution of incompleteness in general.

While I think that each approach has something to contribute to our understanding of these phenomena, I will briefly review arguments from the literature, and a few new ones, to the effect that appreciating the role of the QUD results in a theory which is empirically superior in each of these domains. Properly understood, the QUD-based approach subsumes aspects of the other two, and permits us to avoid the use of ad hoc generalizations and principles appealed to in accounts which focus almost entirely either on the logical forms of adjacent sentences or the rhetorical relations between them. Finally, I will argue that properly understood, a pragmatic account based on the QUD is compatible with a theory of anaphoric competence in discourse which offers a natural explanation for how we process these phenomena so rapidly and successfully, readily resolving (comprehension) or avoiding (production) ambiguity.