

In pursuit of Condition C: the ambiguity of pronominal reference in discourse

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Abstract (preliminary version)

Condition C of the Binding theory rules out as ungrammatical sentences in which a DP c-commands its antecedent (Chomsky 1981; Reinhart 1983; Lasnik 1989). Such sentences are typically of two types: (i) those in which a pronoun c-commands its antecedent (1), and (ii) those in which an R-(eferring) expression c-commands another R-expression (2).

- (1) a. *He_i thinks that Otto_i will win.
b. *He_i sat in Otto_i's chair.
c. *I told him_i that Otto_i would win.
d. *I saw him_i in Otto_i's chair.
- (2) a. *Otto_i thinks that Otto_i will win.
b. *Otto_i sat in Otto_i's chair.
c. *I told Otto_i that Otto_i would win.
d. *I saw Otto_i in Otto_i's chair.

A considerable body of literature since the original statement of Condition C has shown that this formulation of the condition is essentially correct: an R-expression cannot be c-commanded by a DP that is intended to be coreferential with it. At the same time, a number of counterexamples or apparent counterexamples to Condition C have been noted in the literature, suggesting that it is not an entirely simple matter, and that there may be factors other than syntactic configuration that govern whether two expressions in the same sentence may be used to corefer.

To get a flavor of what we are dealing with, consider the examples in (3). (3a) is an instance of so-called 'anti-reconstruction', where the R-expression *Otto* would be c-commanded by the pronoun if it was not in a phrase in A' position. Example (3b) is a case where the context appears to facilitate the interpretation of coreference in spite of the Condition C violation.

- (3) a. Which book that Otto_i wrote does he_i like <which book that Otto_i wrote> the best?
 b. Otto_i arrived late at the party. And then he_i did what Otto_i always does – he_i got drunk. [after Bolinger 1979]

An interesting ambiguity of pronominal reference arises when sentences that violate Condition C out of context are embedded in suitably constructed discourses. Some naturally occurring cases are given in (4).

- (4) a. **He** was shot in the arm when, police say, **Sua** lunged at them. [(O’Grady, 2005:48)]
 b. President Boris Yeltsin today canceled all meetings for this week because of medical tests for his upcoming heart surgery. **He** also punished a former bodyguard who said **Yeltsin** was too sick to govern. [(O’Grady, 2005:48)]
 c. Mr. Mubarak is also heard insisting that, in addition to conspiring with the United States, Mr. Morsi was collaborating with the Palestinian militant group Hamas, which the United States has labeled a terrorist organization. . . . He_i said ‘the Americans’ were ‘liars.’ **He**_i accused them of spreading false rumors that **Mr. Mubarak** might try to hand the presidency to his son Gamal, who had taken up a senior position in the ruling party and begun shaping Egyptian policy. [New York Times, 9/23/13]

Examples such as (4) suggest that purely structural accounts of Condition C are insufficient, insofar as apparent Condition C violations can be avoided by subtle discourse factors, such as perspective. Furthermore, there appear to be languages that do not observe Condition C (Davis 2009).

Our concern in this paper is with two related questions. First, **why** does Condition C hold, at least for the core cases? And second, how does the answer to the first question shed light on why and when we encounter acceptable violations of Condition C?

The first question bears crucially on a foundational issue in linguistic theory. Either Condition C constitutes part of the universal human capacity for language (the language faculty), or it does not. If it does, then there should be an evolutionary explanation for it. As far as we know, no one has offered an account along such lines. It is of course logically possible that Condition C is simply due to a spontaneous mutation, but this is a conclusion that we should arrive at only after we have exhausted the plausible alternatives.

On the other hand, it may be that Condition C does not constitute part of the language faculty. We explore here the hypothesis that it is a consequence of how reference to the entities in a discourse is computed. This computation reflects the temporal sequence in which entities are introduced into the discourse, how they are subsequently referred to, the accessibility of individuals to subsequent reference, and the beliefs of speaker and hearer regarding these entities and their accessibility. A computational explanation, if successful, would explain why it is that certain configurations reliably give rise to Condition C effects. It would also allow for the possibility of constructions and languages in which Condition C does not appear to apply, thereby providing an answer to the second question.

References

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