

Underspecification and procedural meaning: Lexical NPs as anaphora

It is often assumed that there is a distinction between lexical content and grammatical function. As a result, a distinction is commonly drawn between content words such as nouns and verbs, on the one hand, and function words such as auxiliaries and pronouns on the other. Conceptual content is often seen as fully-determined, and largely invariant across contexts, while procedural, functional expressions are considered to lack a fully specified interpretation and to be context-dependent.

Dynamic Syntax (DS, Cann et al. 2005, Kempson et al. 2001, 2011) has developed a slightly different stance in this regard: all lexical information is considered to be procedural. Firstly, lexical information plays a central role in the process of structure building and so includes explicit statements about the contribution to tree growth. Secondly, lexical content is modelled as addressing mental concepts, and so the process of establishing meaning is procedural, involving long-term concepts and the context-specific building of an appropriate ad-hoc concept (cf. Carston 2002).

This talk investigates an empirical domain which highlights exactly the interaction between content and function – the use of lexical NPs as anaphoric elements in discourse, where they appear to function as placeholders, in a similar way to pronouns. Examples are mainly drawn from two Eastern Bantu languages spoken in Mozambique, Makhuwa (Poeta 2016) and Cuwabo (Guérois 2015). In these languages, the canonical Bantu agreement system has been much reduced, and the use of lexical NPs as anaphora could be related to the functional loss resulting from this reduction. However, similar structures are also found in Mexican Zapotec languages (Lillehaugen 2016), where it is not clear whether similar functional motivation exists.

The talk develops an analysis of the phenomenon of lexical NPs used as anaphora from the perspective of Dynamic Syntax. We show that both lexical NPs and proper names share with pronouns an element of underspecification and hence the need for contextual update. For pronouns, this update is only very loosely restricted – by structural constraints on the position in the tree vis-à-vis any antecedent expression, and by constraints on substitution, e.g. in terms of gender and number. In contrast, lexical NPs typically have much tighter restrictions with respect to their potential contextual construal. However, the uses discussed in this paper show that in some languages even lexical NPs can be interpreted as exclusively context-dependent, provided they can decorate a previously established term. In this way the analysis links the use of lexical NPs as anaphora to epithets (cf. Patel-Grosz 2015), which in DS are likewise analysed as decorating an established term. The extension of the epithet analysis lies in the difference in tree relations. While epithets are LINK structures, in the anaphora cases, the lexical NP decorates a fixed daughter within its tree, and the relation with the previous term is established purely pragmatically.

References

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