English constructions with cataphora

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64. English constructions with cataphora

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In this column I present the results of my joint work with Maite Taboada (Simon Fraser University) on cataphora in different types of constructions in English (see Trnavac and Taboada 2016: 93).

In example (1a) the pronoun cannot be coreferential with the subsequent noun, but in (1b) it can, because in (1b), the cataphor occurs in a subordinate adjunct clause.

(1a)   *   He ate the cake when the Smurf was in the box.
(1b)   When he was in the box, the Smurf ate the cake.
             (from Crain 1991, cited in Harris and Bates 2002)

Most of the earlier accounts have suggested that pronouns in constructions cannot precede their referents when they are the subject of the main clause (the sentence in example (1a) above), but may when the pronoun appears in a syntactically subordinate clause (the sentence in (1b)).

Carden (1982) describes the use of constructions with cataphora in the following way:

    NP1 ... Pro1 ... NP2
    Pro1 ... NP1

According to Carden (1982), in the first case, we need to test whether NP1 or NP2 is the antecedent for the pronoun. While in some instances the sequence Pro ... NP is a true cataphoric relation, in others it is a re-identification of a previously mentioned referent (Bolinger 1979), which may be considered cataphora. In the second case proposed by Carden, the

sequence represents the first appearance of the referent in the discourse.

According to Harris and Bates (2002), cataphora is allowed in the backgrounded part of a sentence when backgrounding is achieved through subordination. We examined backgrounding at the discourse level and analyzed 11,636 pronouns that come from the Open American National Corpus (http://americannationalcorpus.org/OANC/), the English Broadcast News (Alabiso et al. 1998) and the RST Discourse Treebank (Carlson et al. 2002). In our corpus, only 57 pronouns could be clearly determined to be cataphoric. Cataphora is a rare phenomenon in naturally-occurring discourse.

We made use of the nucleus-satellite distinction which, as Matthiessen and Thompson (1988) suggest, directly corresponds to the syntactic phenomenon of subordination. We examined the presence of cataphoric *he, she, it* and *they* in data annotated with nucleus-satellite labels (roughly corresponding to main and subordinate clauses). We concluded that backgrounding is one of the factors in combination with which cataphora occurs frequently, both at the clausal and discourse levels. However, it is not sufficient because it operates within the constraints of *Accessibility* (Ariel 1990), and it usually interacts with other parameters of Accessibility, the most stable of which are *Saliency* and *Competition.* Cataphora is always a sentence topic (see Reinhart 1983) and usually there is no competition between two or more referents that are linked to cataphora.

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