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DISCOURSE REFERENTS

Consider an interpretive device that in some manner keeps track of individuals that have been mentioned in a discourse and what has been said about them. One feature any such device must have is to be able to recognize when a novel individual appears in some sentence. For example, in processing sentence (1), it must recognize that the NP a car refers to some yet unmentioned object, which in the following sentence may be referred to again by any of the alternative ways in (2).

(1) I have a car.   (2)

    (a) It is black.

    (b) .The car is black.

However, the same noun phrase does not refer to any car in (3). Consequently, none of the alternatives in (4) is acceptable as a continuation of (3).

(3) I don't have a car.   (4)

    (a) *It is black.

    (b) *The car is black.

The above examples show that sometimes the occurrence of an indefinite NP in the discourse establishes a 'discourse referent' - something that may be referred back to by a pronoun or a definite noun phrase - and sometimes it does not. There are of course many other factors involved besides negation. For example, (5) is ambiguous between two interpretations and only in one sense would it be acceptable to continue the discourse with (6).

(5) Mary wants to marry a Swede.   (6) He is tall.

Several linguists (e.g. LeRoy Baker, Janet Dean) have recently studied these constraints on coreferentiality. They have generally investigated the problem in the framework of Noam Chomsky's Aspects of the Theory of Syntax. It has been assumed that noun phrases are associated with 'referential indices' and marked with respect to the feature [± specific], that is relevant especially in the case of (5).

In this paper I will argue that Chomsky's indices and the notion of specificity are not adequate for handling the problem of discourse referents and that we must adopt the more abstract analysis of noun phrases first put forth by Emmon Bach and James D. McCawley. That is, noun phrases must be considered as having an underlying variable which is bound by a quantifier similar to those in ordinary predicate calculus. In this framework, it is a relatively simple matter to describe the circumstances under which an indefinite NP establishes a discourse referent. - This happens in case the sentence bound by the quantifier is asserted or presupposed to be true by the speaker. However, there are some special cases that have to be recognized. These involve at least the following: (i) counterfactual conditional, (ii) modals, and (iii) quantifier-like adverbs, such as always, often, etc.