

Anaphora and Semantic Innocence

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Please cite the published version, which appeared in the Journal of Semantics.

Abstract

Semantic theories that violate semantic innocence, that is require reference shifts when terms are embedded in ‘that’ clauses and the like, are often challenged by producing sentences where an anaphoric expression, while not itself embedded in a context in which reference shifts, is anaphoric on an antecedent expression that is embedded in such a context. This, in conjunction with a widely accepted principle concerning unproblematic anaphora (the ‘Principle of Anaphoric Reference’), is used to show that such reference shifting has absurd consequences. We show that it is the widely accepted principle concerning anaphora that is to be blamed for these consequences and not the supposed sin of reference shifting.

1 The Argument from Anaphora

Below we will sketch an argument for semantic innocence that we will call the ‘Argument from Anaphora’. Consider the following sentence:

(1) Lois Lane believes that Clark Kent can’t fly. He can.

Now consider the following widely accepted principle concerning anaphora that we shall call the Principle of Anaphoric Reference (PAR).

PAR: An anaphoric term has the same referent as its antecedent.

Needless to say, PAR does not amount to a theory of all anaphora, but it is commonly thought to govern simple cases like (1).

If we take the pronoun ‘he’ in (1) to be anaphoric on the embedded name ‘Clark Kent’, then PAR entails that ‘he’ has the same referent as that embedded name. In order to avoid absurdity, we have to say that ‘he’ refers to Clark Kent, and hence, the intuitive interpretation of the sentence, coupled with the claim that ‘he’ in (1) is anaphoric, and PAR yield the result that the embedded name ‘Clark Kent’ refers to Clark Kent.

The above argument¹ is simple but, if sound, accomplishes a stunning result. Any semantic theory which proposes that the embedded name ‘Clark Kent’ in (1) does not refer to Clark Kent, but to its customary sense, or to a linguistic entity, and so on, will, if PAR is accepted, have the consequence that it is the

¹This argument has been endorsed by Bach (1997, 2000) and has gained enough currency to feature in McKay & Nelson (2008). Our version is a reconstruction of Bach’s version.

customary sense of ‘Clark Kent’, or some linguistic entity, that can fly. This is absurd, and hence, all semantic theories that violate semantic innocence in such a way stand refuted. In other words, the Argument from Anaphora leads us to reject more than a century of Fregean semantics.²

2 The argument refuted

The claim we wish to defend is that the Argument from Anaphora is, in fact, toothless since PAR has absurd consequences. The first point to note is that, while it may be open to debate whether terms shift reference when embedded in that-clauses, it is uncontroversial that when embedded in quotation marks, terms do shift reference. Exactly how quotations are to be understood is of course a matter of some controversy. The theories commonly offered include the identity theory, the demonstrative theory, the name theory, the description theory, and several variations of these.³ But all these theories, and, indeed, common sense, tell us that quotation does change the semantic content of the quoted expressions. Call this the Quotation Intuition (QI). Consider then the following sentence:

(2) Lois Lane considered whether the sentence ‘Clark Kent can fly’ is true. It is; he can fly.

If we take the ‘he’ in (2) to be anaphoric and accept the obvious reading of the sentence on which ‘he’ refers to Clark Kent, then PAR commits us to the conclusion that the name ‘Clark Kent’ embedded in the quotation refers to Clark Kent. The reasoning here is perfectly analogous to the reasoning used above in connection with propositional attitude contexts. But that violates QI, which predicts that, whatever the quoted name ‘Clark Kent’ refers to, it is not Clark Kent.⁴

This now leaves us with a dilemma. If we accept that (2) is well formed, and that ‘he’ in (2) is anaphoric, then PAR and QI are jointly inconsistent in cases like the above. PAR, coupled with the above assumptions and the obvious

²We do not mean to imply that Bach thinks that the argument, by itself, manages to refute a century of Fregean semantics. He does express reservations when he writes that “this difficulty might not be insuperable, but it illustrates why denying semantic innocence just doesn’t ring true” (1997: 217). We take this to imply that he does, at least, think that there is a case for the Fregean to answer and that such an answer will probably involve some theoretical costs. We try to show that the use of PAR in the above argument has such absurd consequences that there simply is no case to answer.

³We take this typology from Saka (1998), where he develops his own Multiple Ostension theory.

⁴A reviewer pointed out that since the quoted expression in (2) is a whole sentence, and not just the constituent term ‘Clark Kent’, it may be strictly compatible with QI that the semantic content of ‘Clark Kent’ is unaffected by the quotation marks. However, we take QI to concern all the constituents of quoted expressions and not just the expression in its entirety. We are not aware of any theories of quotation, which involve changing the semantic content of whole quoted contexts without also changing the semantic content of the elements of such contexts. In any case, example (6*) below makes our point without relying on the stronger reading of QI.

reading of the sentence, leaves us with the obviously wrong conclusion that the quoted ‘Clark Kent’ refers to Clark Kent. But if we leave QI intact, perhaps by saying that the quoted ‘Clark Kent’ refers to itself, then we can only preserve PAR by providing a reading of (2) so that it says that the name ‘Clark Kent’ can fly. This is even more absurd.

We see no way of surrendering QI in cases like (2) and are forced to conclude that PAR is at fault. This vindicates our main claim that pronominals that seem to refer to antecedents introduced in attitude contexts, as in (1), do not present any problem for the Fregean. For cases like (2) make it plain that anaphoric reference can occur, even where there is the clearest possible reference shift, namely quotation. Anaphoric reference is perfectly compatible with reference shifts. PAR, and hence the Argument from Anaphora, collapses.

3 Objections

We will briefly look at some possible responses from those who wish to save the Argument from Anaphora. It might be objected that (2) is somehow suspect or not well formed. If this verdict is simply based on raw linguistic intuitions, it seems ill-founded. Example (2) looks perfectly fine to us, and some informal questioning of non-philosophers has not yet turned up anyone who could even understand why we would ask if (2) is an acceptable English sentence. But let us pursue this line of reasoning a bit further. The most obvious way to develop it would be to admit that non-philosophers might well not find anything suspect, but to attribute this to an insufficient understanding of the relation between the semantics of (2), and the content it can be used to convey, that is pragmatics. The objector could insist that PAR is correct and say that (2), literally, does say that the name ‘Clark Kent’ can fly. However, speakers confuse this with the content that (2) would typically be used to convey, and so do not find fault with (2).

The problem with such an objection is that it seems to beg the question. What, we may ask, is the principled basis being used here to declare (2) improper? We fail to see how this can be based on anything more than an adherence to PAR since, if PAR were false, there would be no obstacle to regarding (2) as having the literal meaning suggested by intuition. As an argumentative strategy for someone wishing to defend PAR, the objection thus begs the question. Another difficulty, if this sort of reasoning is allowed, is that it opens the door for the Fregean to declare (1) improper on similar grounds. The Fregean could, based on his deep commitment to reference shifts in attitudinal contexts, claim his theory compatible with PAR by insisting that (1) literally says that the common sense of ‘Clark Kent’ can fly. But, the Fregean could continue, most speakers do not realize this as they confuse what (1) is typically used to convey with its literal meaning and mistakenly think that (1) coupled with PAR count against the Fregean. Hence, the Fregean could challenge (1) in the exact same way that the objector challenges (2), and the Argument from Anaphora loses its force. We have no principled basis to adjudicate this debate and reach

stalemate.

The second potential objection would be to deny that ‘he’ in (2) is anaphoric. There are different ways such an account could go, but we will only look at one version as we fail to see a version that does not run into similar difficulties. The objector could claim that ‘he’ in (2) is a demonstrative that just happens to be preceded by a term that has the same ordinary referent as ‘he’ in (2), and this misleads us into thinking that ‘he’ is anaphoric. Rather ‘he’ in (2) is a demonstrative referring to a contextually salient ‘he’, or something similar, and not a true anaphoric pronoun. We have no objections to such an account. Note, however, that if any such an account is to be useful in the present argumentative context, it must have one decidedly odd feature. It needs to show that ‘he’ in (2) is not anaphoric but also to avoid the consequence that ‘he’ in (1) is not anaphoric. If it fails to draw such distinction, then PAR is not applicable in (1) either, and the Argument from Anaphora fails to get off the ground.

We fail to see any basis on which to drive such a wedge between (1) and (2). If the objector motivates the non-anaphoric nature of ‘he’ in (2) by saying that there cannot be anaphoric reference to a term in a quoted context, this again will boil down to an appeal to PAR. In the present context that is circular. Furthermore, we are not aware of any theory of anaphora that would give a principled distinction between the use of ‘he’ in (1) and (2), and we seriously doubt that such a theory is possible. All that the introduction of such a view, and others like it, would do in the present context is to open the door to the Fregean to argue that ‘he’ in (1) is actually a demonstrative referring to some contextually salient ‘he’. This would mean that ‘he’ in (1) is not a true anaphoric expression at all, in which case the Argument from Anaphora fails.

The final objection we wish to discuss concerns cases where anaphoric reference to an antecedent term in a quoted context seems ‘odd’ or forced, thus providing some evidence against the possibility of this kind of anaphora.⁵ Consider, for example, the following pair:

- (3) Lois Lane considered whether Clark Kent can fly. He can.
- (4) Lois Lane considered the truth or falsity of the sentence ‘Clark Kent can fly’. He can.

Whereas (3) is well formed, example (4) seems odd. Also consider also the following pair:

- (5) Lois Lane knows Clark Kent. She likes him.
- (6) Lois Lane knows the name ‘Clark Kent’. She likes him.

Whereas (5) is well formed, example (6) seems odd. This presents a *prima facie* problem for our account, for does our use of sentence (2) not lead one to expect that (4) and (6) should be well formed?

However, there are compelling reasons to think that the oddness of (4) and (6) comes down to pragmatics rather than anaphora failure. What makes (4)

⁵We would like to thank an anonymous referee for urging us to consider these cases.

and (6) odd is that their first sentences lead us to expect a follow-up concerning the truth value of a sentence, and Lois Lane's knowledge of a name, respectively, and not a follow-up concerning Clark Kent. But this does not rule out anaphora into the quoted contexts. To see this, consider how (4) and (6) can be fixed by adding a clause to their second sentences, speaking directly to the subject raised by their first sentences, while preserving the anaphoric clause:

(4*) Lois Lane considered the truth or falsity of the sentence 'Clark Kent can fly'. It is true; he can.

(6*) Lois Lane knows the name 'Clark Kent'. In fact, she not only knows the name; she likes him.

In both (4*) and (6*), the expectation raised pragmatically by the first sentence is discharged in a way consistent with this expectation. This renders both sentences immaculate, and hence, we have every reason to believe that the oddity of (4) and (6) is entirely pragmatic.

To our minds, the Argument from Anaphora stands refuted.

References

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