Reviews

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This book develops a general theory of the cognitive process by which the referent or antecedent of a noun phrase is retrieved (accessed) from context by the hearer of a speech event. The central issue is thus the following: how is a hearer led to correctly identify the referent of a nominal expression used by the speaker? One common view divides context into three 'geographical' types, each of which is correlated to one class of referring expressions: names and definite descriptions refer to Encyclopaedic Knowledge; demonstratives and deictics refer to the Physical Environment of the speech event; pronouns and gaps refer to the Linguistic Context. Mira Ariel (henceforth: MA) argues that what natural languages encode, through the choice of some nominal expression, is not the geographic context to which it refers, but the degree of Accessibility of its referent. Should the referring properties of nominal expressions be described in terms of geographically-defined types of contexts, we shouldn’t expect names, for instance, to be able to refer back to the Linguistic Context. What MA means to show is that every type of nominal expression may actually serve to retrieve referents from all three types of contexts.

The Introduction (pp. 1–30), presents an overview of Accessibility Theory. The notion of Accessibility, the author claims, should replace that of Givenness (cf. Chafe 1976). Accessibility is seen by MA as a continuum, a relative notion rather than an absolute one: the referent of some nominal expression E1 may only be said to be more accessible, or less accessible, than the referent of another nominal expression E2. Four factors (at least) are shown to be relevant for Accessibility: distance (between an expression and its referent/antecedent), competition (between possible referents/antecedents), saliency (of the referent: e.g. a topic is more salient than a non-topic), and unity (i.e. discourse continuity). In other words, by using a higher-Accessibility marker M1 (e.g. a pronoun, rather than a name), the speaker, in the unmarked case, indicates to the hearer that the referent is close and/or has an obviously unique and salient referent, and/or occurs within the same discourse domain. By using a lower-Accessibility marker M2 (e.g. a name, rather than a pronoun), the speaker conversely indicates...
that the referent is remote, and/or potentially non-unique, and/or not salient, and/or is separated from E2 by a discourse boundary.

Accessibility, MA suggests, is a cognitive concept which may be correlated to the structure of memory. For a speaker to mark the referent of an expression as more, or less, accessible, boils down to indicating to the hearer how deep in his/her memory he/she should search for it: Encyclopaedic Knowledge provides the least accessible referents, stored in deep, or long-term, memory; Physical Context provides referents of intermediate Accessibility, and Linguistic Context provides the closest, most accessible types of referents. Accessibility marking may thus be viewed as a linguistic means to achieve efficient context searches, and therefore as a natural development of Relevance Theory, as presented in Sperber and Wilson (1986).

Part I (pp. 31–93) is devoted to ‘discourse references’ (as opposed to syntactic anaphora). MA reviews three groups of referring expressions, taken as Accessibility markers: definite descriptions and names (‘low-Accessibility markers’), deictic and demonstrative expressions (‘intermediate-Accessibility markers’), pronouns and gaps (‘high-Accessibility markers’). This three-way division is motivated by purely expository purposes, since MA’s main point here is that none of these three groups forms a homogeneous subclass in terms of Accessibility: definite descriptions and names, for instance, are all lower-Accessibility markers, but not all definite descriptions and names signal the same degree of Accessibility. MA’s hypotheses are based on an impressive collection of attested examples, drawn from various types of written and oral discourses, mainly in English and Hebrew.

Chapter I (pp. 33–46) deals with lower-Accessibility markers, i.e. definite descriptions and names. Definite descriptions, as it turns out, refer more often to the Linguistic Context than to Encyclopaedic Knowledge or Physical Context. The highest score of discourse-bound definite descriptions is found in fiction texts, and the lowest score in editorials and semi-academic texts. News items pattern in two ways as regards definite-description behaviour: those that provide brand-new information (e.g. a piece on a bank robbery) pattern together with fiction texts (with a very high score of discourse-bound definite descriptions), and those that provide further information on current events (e.g. in 1990, a piece on the Lebanon war) pattern together with editorials or semi-academic texts (with more definite descriptions referring to Encyclopaedic Knowledge or Physical Context). Texts where definite descriptions refer more frequently to Encyclopaedic Knowledge are those whose purpose is to comment known facts, rather than to inform.

MA describes proper names as those referring expressions which signal the lowest degree of Accessibility, but challenges the current view that they are rigid designators. All referring expressions, MA argues, are in principle non-rigid – they are context-dependent to some extent. Like other types of referring expressions, proper names do not form a homogeneous class with respect to degree of Accessibility. The borderline between proper names and definite descriptions is actually difficult to draw: the 'numier' a definite description is (the more unique its referent), the more likely it is to
become a proper name, cf. *Mother, Teacher*: once a definite description has been thus shortened into a name, the form/meaning relation becomes more arbitrary. In many cases, a proper name may only be used if the speaker can assume that its referent is familiar to the hearer. However, proper names appear on the whole to signal lower Accessibility than definite descriptions.

Degree of Accessibility, MA argues, is linked to informative content: the less accessible a referent is, the more information is needed by the hearer to identify it. This observation leads to interesting distinctions among subgroups of lower-Accessibility markers. In Western countries, full names + modifiers (e.g. *John Smith, the chief of the Tyberias police station*) signal lower Accessibility than mere full names (e.g. *John Smith*); full names signal lower Accessibility than last names (*Smith*); last names signal lower Accessibility than first names (*John*); and first names signal lower Accessibility than nicknames (*Johnny*). Similarly, long definite descriptions (*the queen of England*) signal lower Accessibility than short ones (*the queen*). Long definite descriptions and full names (+ modifiers) thus occur more frequently discourse-initially, while short definite descriptions and shortened names or nicknames naturally occur discourse-externally, where they can refer back to the linguistic context.

Chapter 2 (pp. 47–55) deals with intermediate-Accessibility markers, i.e. indexicals and demonstrative expressions. In languages where personal pronouns (i.e. 1st and 2nd person pronouns) may be zeroed in some contexts (e.g. Hebrew), the choice between full pronouns and their zero counterparts may be accounted for by Accessibility Theory: full pronouns are preferred whenever the degree of Accessibility of the referent is lowered (contrastive or discontinuous contexts), and zero forms occur whenever the degree of Accessibility of the referent is high (topical referent, continuous contexts). Demonstrative expressions may refer to the Physical Context, but it turns out that most demonstratives are in fact endophoric. Endophoric demonstratives, MA argues, generally signal a lower degree of Accessibility than pronouns and gaps. Rich (long) demonstrative expressions (e.g. *that book*) signal lower Accessibility than poor (short) ones (e.g. *that*), and distal demonstratives (e.g. *that [book]*) signal lower Accessibility than proximal demonstratives (e.g. *this [book]*).

Chapter 3 (pp. 56–68) deals with high-Accessibility markers, i.e. pronouns and gaps. Although generally endophoric, these expressions are not always so, which supports Accessibility Theory, rather than a theory linking types of expressions to geographically-defined types of contexts. MA first challenges Hankamer and Sag’s (1976) claim that ‘surface anaphora’ (i.e. gaps resulting from deletion) may never be pragmatically controlled, i.e. may not refer back to an invisible discourse antecedent. She shows that such gaps may in fact be pragmatically controlled if the referent is extremely salient—and thus highly accessible. The same principle applies to subject-pronoun deletion: 1st and 2nd person subject pronouns are more frequently deletable than 3rd person pronouns, because their referents are more salient, therefore more accessible. Like other types of referring expressions, pronouns do not form a homogeneous class in terms of degree of Accessibility. Stressed pronouns, unstressed pronouns, clitic
pronouns, Agreement markers, reflexives and null pronouns signal referents of decreasing Accessibility degrees. Interestingly, pronouns do not signal the same degrees of Accessibility across languages.

In Chapter 4 (pp. 69-93), MA proposes an Accessibility Scale, based on the results of chapters 1 to 3, i.e. running from full names + modifier (lowest Accessibility markers), through definite descriptions, shortened names, demonstratives, stressed and unstressed pronouns, to gaps (highest Accessibility markers). This scale, MA claims, is relevant for English and Hebrew, and might have to be somewhat amended to account for other languages. She argues, however, that it is to a large extent universal. More precisely, some languages may lack one type of Accessibility markers (e.g. some languages do not have definite determiners); but the order in which the available types of expressions, in any language, appear on the Accessibility Scale, is always the same: e.g. proper names always signal lower Accessibility than pronouns, and not conversely.

MA then proceeds to explain why this is so, i.e. why the Accessibility Scale is universal. Three criteria account for the fact that certain types of linguistic forms are linked to certain degrees of Accessibility:

- **Informativity**: the lower the degree of Accessibility of the referent, the more informative the expression which refers to it must be;
- **Rigidity** (non-ambiguity): the more rigid an expression, i.e. the more it tends to refer to a unique referent in a potentially ambiguous context, the lower Accessibility it signals;
- **Attenuation**, i.e. what Givón (1983) calls 'phonological size' (an unstressed or short form is more attenuated than a stressed or long one): the higher the degree of Accessibility of a referent, the more attenuated the form used to refer to it. Crucially, unmarkedness must be distinguished from attenuation: unmarkedness may involve other criteria than attenuation, such as frequency (e.g. null pronouns are unmarked in Japanese, but marked in English). However, attenuated pronouns always signal higher Accessibility than non-attenuated ones.

Accessibility marking thus stands as a highly productive system: the three criteria of Informativity, Rigidity, and Attenuation constantly apply to produce new Accessibility markers.

The fact that these three criteria play a role in determining degree of Accessibility is derived by MA from Relevance Theory, as developed in Sperber and Wilson (1986): the speaker tries to choose the most economic means of getting his/her message across. MA argues, however, that Relevance Theory does not suffice to account for the Accessibility Scale: for instance, the 'economy' requirement does not account for the fact that distal demonstratives signal lower Accessibility than proximal ones (both types of forms being equally 'costly'), nor for the fact that definite markers, though more attenuated than demonstratives, signal lower Accessibility. Relevance Theory would also predict, for instance, that nicknames derived by shortening (*Fred*) should signal higher Accessibility than nicknames derived by lengthening (*Johnny*), which
doesn't seem to be the case. MA thus concludes that Accessibility marking is needed as a complement of Relevance Theory: it stands as a useful tool serving Relevance requirements.

Part II (pp. 95–164) is devoted to sentence-level anaphora. In Chapter 5 (pp. 97–105), MA argues that Accessibility Theory is also relevant for the study of sentence-level anaphora. She does not claim, however, that syntactic constraints on anaphora are irrelevant or do not exist. She simply suggests that the three Binding principles of generative grammar may be viewed as a grammatical encoding of Accessibility principles. Anaphors, pronominals and R-expressions correspond to three levels of Accessibility: anaphors signal extremely high Accessibility, and therefore point to a very close antecedent; pronominals signal high, but less high, Accessibility; and R-expressions are lower-Accessibility markers, which correlatively may not be bound. Leaving this as an open question, MA mainly argues here that wherever two or more sentence-anaphoric expressions alternate in some structural configuration, the choice made by the speaker is dictated by Accessibility Theory: thus stressed pronouns, unstressed pronouns, elicit pronouns, rich Agreement, poor Agreement and null Agreement signal increasing degrees of Accessibility. Accessibility Theory also provides a more satisfactory account of the phenomena analysed by generative linguists in terms of the 'Avoid Pronoun' principle, which states that a full pronoun should be avoided whenever possible. Wherever this principle is assumed to be at work, the null option is preferred, or obligatory. On the other hand, generative grammar never proposed an 'Avoid Zero Pronoun' principle, to account for the many cases where the full pronoun is preferred, or obligatory. This, MA argues, is due to the fact that generative grammar does not take discourse context into consideration. Accessibility Theory predicts that both versions of the 'Avoid Pronoun' principle should apply, the null option (Avoid Full Pronoun) generally signalling higher Accessibility, and the full option (Avoid Null Pronoun) signalling lower Accessibility. MA shows that this claim receives empirical support in many languages.

Chapter 6 (pp. 106–130) deals with zero subjects. MA first discusses syntactic approaches to null-subject sentences. 'Pro-drop' was first correlated to 'rich agreement', but the facts of, e.g., Chinese, led to distinguish actual 'pro-drop' languages, such as Italian, from null-topic languages, such as Chinese. Provision also had to be made to account for the different behaviour of Chinese matrix vs. embedded null subjects. Arguing that current syntactic analyses do not provide a global explanation of the known data, MA develops an alternative account within the Accessibility Theory framework.

Like the syntacticians whose ideas she discusses, MA does not treat zero subjects as a homogeneous phenomenon. She distinguishes three cases, characterised by the type of Agreement with which the zero subject co-occurs: null Agreement (e.g. Chinese), poor Agreement (e.g. Hebrew, in the Present tense), and rich Agreement (e.g. Italian). The richer the Agreement marker, the more accessible its referent: Accessibility Theory thus predicts that, in a language which allows null subjects and has both rich
and poor Agreement markers, zero subjects should not be licensed by the poorer Agreement and not by the richer Agreement. The nature of the antecedent is another factor of Accessibility: the more salient the antecedent – e.g. the more topical – the more accessible its referent (see Introduction). Accessibility Theory predicts here that a language should not allow high-Accessibility markers (such as null subjects) to refer to a less salient antecedent (e.g. a non-topic or non-subject) and not to a more salient one. The distance between the anaphor and its antecedent is a third factor of Accessibility: the closer the antecedent, the more accessible. Accessibility Theory predicts that a language should not allow highest-Accessibility markers to refer to a remote (e.g. non-c-commanding) antecedent and not to a close (e.g. c-commanding) one.

MA then proceeds to show that these predictions are borne out by the distribution of zero subjects in Hebrew and Chinese.

The distribution of Hebrew null subjects has been studied in some detail by Borer (1983, 1985, 1985). Observing that (a) null subjects never co-occur with the Present tense, which she assumes to have no Person feature, (b) null subjects in matrix clauses only co-occur with 1st or 2nd person endings, and (c) null subjects in embedded clauses are always bound in the matrix clause, Borer claims that matrix null subjects are instances of ‘small pro’ which must be licensed by ‘rich’ Inflection, and that embedded null subjects are anaphors. MA argues that Borer’s description is based on literary Hebrew only, and that various counterexamples to Borer’s descriptive generalisations may be found in spoken and familiar Hebrew: MA quotes attested examples where a null subject occurs with the Present tense, where a 3rd person null subject occurs in a matrix clause, where an embedded null subject is sentence-free, has a split antecedent, etc. MA concludes that Borer’s theory is too restrictive, and that an analysis in terms of the Accessibility Scale provides a more adequate account for all the facts.

The central question is (in the spirit of Bolinger 1979) why a null subject should be chosen by the speaker, rather than a full pronoun or a clitic pronoun. As regards Informativity, MA argues, referring expressions which bear a Person feature (i.e. full pronouns, clitic pronouns, and 1st and 2nd-person Agreement markers in the Past and Future) score higher than those which do not (i.e. Present-tense 1st and 2nd person Agreement markers, and 3rd person Agreement markers, which are only marked for Gender and Number). As regards Rigidity, 1st and 2nd-person pronouns score higher (are less ambiguous) than 3rd-person pronouns, and 3rd-person Past/Future Agreement markers (specific to 3rd person) score higher than Present-tense Agreement (unmarked for person). As regards Attenuation, inflections score higher than clitic pronouns, and clitic pronouns score higher than full pronouns. Accessibility Theory predicts that the more accessible a referent is, the less informative and rigid, and the more attenuated, should be the marker chosen to refer to it; and conversely, that a higher-Accessibility marker should have a highly accessible referent. MA shows in a very detailed fashion that this general line of explanation is supported by the data of Hebrew.
Accessibility Theory allows us to regard the distribution of null subjects as following from essentially the same principles in Hebrew and in Chinese, although Chinese has no explicit Agreement to license a ‘pro’ subject. What all null subjects have in common is that they are very-high-Accessibility markers. High-Accessibility may be marked by syntactic means, such as rich Agreement, or binding, but it may also be correlated to non-syntactic properties, such as the great saliency or topichood of a discourse antecedent. In matrix clauses, Chinese null subjects do indeed tend to point to highly topical discourse antecedents, as shown by, e.g., Li and Thompson (1979). In embedded clauses, Chinese null subjects tend to (but do not necessarily) refer back to the matrix subject, which is the most accessible (close, and topical) referent. Unlike Huang (1984), whose analysis she criticises, MA thus proposes, within the framework of Accessibility Theory, a unitary account of all Chinese null subjects.

Chapter 7 (pp. 131–163) explores the correlation between clause-linkage and anaphoric marking, i.e. between the degree of ‘connexion’ between clauses, and the types of anaphoric expressions which occur in them. Accessibility Theory predicts – through the criterion of Unity (see Introduction) – that a greater connection between clauses should trigger the occurrence of higher-Accessibility markers. MA shows that this prediction seems to be borne out by various data involving different types of embedded clauses.

Reviewing Switch-Reference (S-R) systems, MA proposes that some S-R markers should be analysed as Accessibility markers, ‘same-reference’ markers signalling higher Accessibility, and ‘distinct-reference’ markers, lower Accessibility. For this set of facts, MA’s analysis is thus similar to that of Finer (1985), who treats same-reference markers as anaphors and distinct-reference markers as pronominal expressions. For most S-R systems, however, MA claims that such an analysis is descriptively inadequate: the ‘same-reference’ vs. ‘distinct-reference’ readings, she claims, actually follow from the type of semantic connection (the degree of cohesion) between clauses; so-called S-R markers are then clause-linkage markers, rather than Accessibility markers.

MA then proceeds to show that Accessibility Theory makes an interesting prediction regarding the distribution of Resumptive pronouns. Accessibility Theory predicts that, in languages having both wh-traces and resumptive pronouns, the latter, being less attenuated than gaps, should signal lower Accessibility, while gaps should signal higher Accessibility. It follows that gaps and resumptive pronouns should not have the same distribution. MA argues that this prediction of Accessibility Theory is borne out by the distribution of gaps and resumptive pronouns in Hebrew. Generally speaking, he null option is preferred whenever the antecedent is more accessible (closer, less independent, etc.), and the resumptive-pronoun option whenever the antecedent is less accessible (more remote/independent, etc.)

The last section of this chapter deals with backward anaphora. MA distinguishes two types of backward anaphora: true backward anaphora, where the antecedent
embodies a New entity within its discourse; and pseudo-backward anaphora, as studied in Bolinger (1979), where the sentence-internal antecedent re-identifies a Given referent. True backward anaphora, MA argues, necessarily involves a high dependency between the pronoun clause and the antecedent clause. Pseudo backward anaphora, on the other hand, requires a lower degree of dependency between the two clauses. Since high clause-linkage is correlated to high Accessibility, Accessibility Theory predicts that true backward anaphora, wherever it exists, should generally involve highest-Accessibility markers, i.e. the most attenuated type of pronouns (null rather than full, clitic rather than stressed, etc.).

Part III (pp. 165–220) deals with the interaction of Accessibility with pragmatic and social factors.

Chapter 8 (pp. 169–197) explores the relationship between Accessibility Theory and Relevance Theory. Accessibility Theory, she has claimed, is a necessary complement to Relevance Theory; however, some uses of referring expressions must be directly accounted for in terms of Relevance Theory.

One such class of cases involves referring expressions occurring discourse-initially. Attested discourses show that a name or definite description is more natural in this position than a deictic expression. A deictic expression, however, may also refer outside the Linguistic Context, and it signals a higher degree of Accessibility than a name or definite description; Accessibility Theory would therefore predict that an indexical should be less costly to process. But Relevance Theory, MA claims, correctly accounts for the facts: a name or definite description is preferred discourse-initially because it refers to Encyclopaedic Knowledge, which contains the most permanent, hence reliable, type of information; the information coming from the Physical context is less permanent, therefore not reliable enough to ensure relevant referent indentification discourse-initially.

Relevance Theory also directly accounts for all the cases where some referring expression is potentially ambiguous. What, then, leads the addressee to correctly identify the intended referent, are considerations of plausibility which, MA argues, derive from Relevance rather than Accessibility principles.

Pragmatic (Relevance) considerations are also at work in cases involving definite descriptions referring back to inferred (implicit) discourse antecedents, as in: Mary dressed the baby. The clothes were made of pink wool (p. 185). It is pragmatic, rather than grammatical, considerations that lead to construe an anaphoric relation in such cases. MA also argues that the reason a pronoun cannot occur in place of the definite description (The clothes were made …/*They were made …) is that the antecedent – being implicit – is not accessible enough to justify the use of a higher-Accessibility marker.

The next and last section of this chapter is devoted to presuppositions, which MA proposes to describe and subclassify as Accessibility markers. Distributional constraints on the various presuppositional items and constructions may, she argues, be derived from differences in degree of Accessibility. For instance, discourse-initial
presuppositions, which refer to the Encyclopaedic context and involve a high degree of commitment on the part of the speaker, signal a low degree of Accessibility, while so-called ‘cancelled presuppositions’ (Did you break the window? – No, there wasn’t any window), which refer back to the Linguistic Context, signal high Accessibility.

Chapter 9 (pp. 198–220) deals with special use of Accessibility markers, i.e. markers whose choice involves a deliberate discrepancy between the degree of Accessibility of the referent and that of the expression used to refer to it. ‘Insincere’ use of Accessibility markers is generally correlated to various stylistic effects: insincere use of higher-Accessibility markers may aim at vividness (How’s that throat?), or at expressing empathy (e.g. empathic reflexives, cf. Kuno 1987); insincere use of lower-Accessibility markers (e.g. repeating a name, instead of using a pronoun) may indicate repulsion, emphasis, etc.

In the last section, MA develops the interesting idea that people belonging to minority groups, e.g. women, Arabs (in Israel), etc., generally tend to be designated by means of higher-Accessibility markers. Basing her claims on a comprehensive exploration of Israeli attested discourses, MA shows that expressions referring to women tend to range higher on the Accessibility scale than expressions referring to men: for instance, women are more often or more quickly than men designated by their first name (Doctor Georgette Kuds > Georgette). The patronising or pejorative connotation may be correlated here to the fake familiarity effect produced by Accessibility raising.

This is a very well-documented and stimulating book, which should be read by all linguists interested in reference, whether pragmantics or syntacticians. It is a real gold mine of examples, and it will be a basic textbook for those who aim at circumscribing the workings of ‘discourse grammar’. MA’s Accessibility Theory would no doubt find further useful support in the work done on referring expressions by Corblin (1987), Kleiber (see Kleiber 1990 for references), Popescu and Tasmowski (1988), Tasmowski (to appear), Tasmowski and Verluyten (1982). The material and analyses presented in Parts I and II are also wonderfully challenging to anyone studying pronouns within the Binding Theory framework. As presented by MA, Accessibility is a ‘linguistic pragmatic’ concept, a kind of necessary complement to syntax, a cognitive explanation of the Binding principles. It is clear, however, that although compatible with the current formulation(s) of the binding principles, Accessibility Theory doesn’t strictly preclude the binding of an ‘R-expression’, the local binding of a ‘pronominal’, or the nonlocal binding of an anaphor – i.e. Binding Theory violations. Since such violations actually seem to be attested in natural languages (see Burzio 1989, Shim 1991, Zrbi-Hertz 1989, 1990, 1991), Accessibility Theory might eventually help reformulate the Binding Theory itself.

References


This volume contains no fewer than twenty-eight papers, selected from those submitted after the fifth international conference on English historical linguistics, held