

Van der Sandt and Geurts on presupposition and anaphora¹

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According to Van der Sandt (1992) and Geurts & Beaver (2007), presupposition is just a variety of anaphora. This surprisingly original notion quickly spread through the circles associated with Kamp's Discourse Representation Theory (DRT; Kamp 1981, Kamp and Reyle 1993), so that it now seems to be commonly accepted in those circles. It originates in Van der Sandt (1992), where it is proposed that there is one single mechanism underlying both anaphora resolution and presupposition projection. The proposal is startling, as the two do not look as if they had anything in common. And indeed, this identification is, one has to say, a curious miscarriage of science, or, more bluntly, an unprofessional botching-up of otherwise good notions.

Rolling anaphora and presupposition into one is *a priori* an extremely unlikely and hazardous enterprise which will require a very solid underpinning indeed for it to be successful. However, Van der Sandt (1992) provides no underpinning at all. On the contrary, he equates anaphora with external, or perhaps with donkey anaphora, and he equates presupposition with presupposition projection, thus confusing the phenomenon itself with a mechanism associated with it. Having thus blurred the notions concerned, he then claims that the two are identical. This alleged "identity" can, therefore, only be blurred itself.

DRT-practitioners accepted this all too readily, as they have always felt diffident with regard to presuppositions, either because they consider presuppositions to be of a nonformal, pragmatic nature and thus to be someone else's business or, if presuppositions are formally tractable, because they threaten to drag one down the slope of nonstandard logics and perhaps even of nonstandard mathematics. Van der Sandt's 'solution' thus couldn't have come at a better moment.

Van der Sandt is curiously vague about the nature of presupposition. His paper opens as follows (Van der Sandt 1992: 333): "The traditional view on presupposition has it that presuppositions are referring expressions." This is odd, to say the least. Since Strawson (1950)—the starting point of presuppositional studies—there have been various approaches or, if one likes, traditions. One can distinguish (a) a tradition that continues the lines drawn by Strawson and is Fregean in nature, (b) a tradition continuing the lines set out in Russell (1905) for the analysis of definite descriptions, (c) a tradition attempting to reduce presuppositions to pragmatic phenomena (Wilson 1975) and (d) a discourse-semantic tradition, defended by the present author, reducing presuppositions to lexical preconditions, together with a trivalent logic and two kinds of falsity

¹ This paper is essentially Section 10.8 in Seuren (2010: 372–377).

(Dummett 1973: 425–6; Seuren 1985, 1988, 2000, and many other publications). Given this diversity of opinions on presuppositional phenomena, one is mystified by Van der Sandt's expression "the traditional view".

Moreover, calling presuppositions "expressions", and "referring expressions" at that, is something that no current of thought on presuppositions, traditional or not, has, to my knowledge (based on forty years of research in presupposition theory), ever been daring enough to do. It would have helped if Van der Sandt had mentioned some references, to jog his readers' memory or let them find out what could be meant, but, of course, he does not, because there aren't any. Nor does he give any further explanation of this highly original thought. In other words, the first sentence of Van der Sandt's paper is simply bizarre.

But perhaps we shouldn't worry too much about the supposedly "traditional" but in fact unidentifiable, view, because a few lines down on the same page we read: "For Frege it is referring expressions that give rise to presuppositions." In the light of the previous quote, this should be read (in the presumed but unidentifiable "traditional view") as: "For Frege it is referring expressions that give rise to referring expressions." This is an inauspicious start of what is presumably meant to be a serious paper. Since the remainder of the paper hardly adds anything, we can safely let it rest.

Geurts and Beaver (2007), an encyclopedia article on DRT, is equally evasive as regards the notion of presupposition. These authors define, or describe, presupposition as follows (Section 5.2): "Presuppositions are chunks of information associated with particular lexical items or syntactic constructions." This is a very different notion from what one guesses that Van der Sandt purports to put forward, but equally unhelpful. An English word like *pal* and an English construction like *ain't* are "associated with" the "chunk of information" that a colloquial register is being used. Does that make this information presuppositional? Presumably not. But then, what distinguishes this information from the information conveyed by presuppositions? The answer is not to be found either in this encyclopedia article or anywhere else in the DRT literature. Geurts and Beaver (2007) thus shares the fuzziness with Van der Sandt (1992) but it directs its diffusing bundle of darkness in a different direction.

Yet, despite these notional unclarities, the authors in question maintain that there is one unified mechanism underlying both external-anaphora resolution and presupposition projection. This should entail that where an external anaphor is unresolvable, presupposition projection is blocked and vice versa. *A priori* one is inclined to think that such a view is implausible, because anaphora resolution is a matter of referential identification, whereas presupposition projection is a matter of semantic consistency within a discourse domain and its subdomains. It would be most remarkable if these two processes were to be seen to be subject to the same mechanism. And, of course, they are not.

Geurts and Beaver (2007, Section 2) argue for the same-mechanism position on the strength of examples like (1) (the exclamation mark indicates incoherence):

- (1) Pedro doesn't own a donkey. !*It is grey.*

In their perspective, a parallel can be drawn with (2):

- (2) Pedro doesn't own a donkey. !*Juanita regrets he does.*

Just as (2) is incoherent because the (factive) presupposition that Pedro owns a donkey, carried by the second sentence in (2), is denied in the first sentence, in the same manner (1) is thought to be incoherent because the *it* in the second sentence in (1) requires an accessible address to latch on to, which is absent owing to the negation in the first sentence.

In fact, however, the incoherence of (1) has nothing to do with anaphora resolution: the anaphoric relation between *it* and *a donkey* is clear enough, as one can see immediately when one replaces *grey* with, for example, *a fiction of his mind*. On the contrary, it has everything to do with the fact that the predicate *grey* induces a presupposition of actual existence. *Grey* is *extensional* with regard to its subject term, which means that, for truth to arise, this term must refer to an actually existing entity: for something to be grey it must first exist.

Since extensionality or intensionality of a given predicate with respect to some term position is a matter of lexical preconditions and hence of presuppositions, the incoherence of (1) is not a matter of anaphora but of presupposition. The anaphora aspect of (1) is unproblematic. The Principle of Maximal Unity for discourse domains (Seuren 2010: 207–215) says that entity representations (addresses) in any domain or subdomain are retrievable from any domain or subdomain. Therefore, the anaphor *it* has free access to any other domain or subdomain in **D**, including the subdomain under negation created by the first sentence in (1).

The often heard claim that definite determiners, including those thought to be present in definite pronouns, induce existential presuppositions is false. As has been amply shown in Seuren (1985, 1988, 1994, 2000) and again in Seuren (2009: 128–131) and Seuren (2010: 363–372), existential presuppositions originate from the extensional character of argument positions and not from definite determiners. Yet Geurts and Beaver (2007, Section 5.2) still claim that existential presuppositions derive from definite determiners, even though they are fully aware of the arguments put forward in many publications by me over the past thirty years showing that this position is untenable. But much as one may try to ignore arguments or theories out of existence, it doesn't necessarily make them go away.

Since the first sentence in (1) denies the actual existence of a donkey owned by Pedro, the sequence as a whole is semantically incoherent, though with a perfectly straightforward anaphora resolution. In (3a–d), there is again no problem as regards

anaphora resolution (although, according to Geurts and Beaver, there should be one in (3a)), but they differ from (1) in that they are all fully consistent. Their consistency derives from the fact that not all predicates involved in the second clauses of (3a–d) are fully extensional with regard to their object-term positions or with regard to the subdomains they introduce:

- (3)
- a. John doesn't own a Ferrari_i. He has simply invented *it*_i.
 - b. John may own a Ferrari_i, but I have never seen *it*_i.
 - c. John may own a Ferrari_i but he may also have simply invented *it*_i.
 - d. Geert has announced that he is going to make an anti-Islam film_i; but I doubt that *it*_i will ever materialize.

Example (3a) illustrates the fact that anaphora resolution does not require an antecedent address in the main or truth domain of the discourse at hand. All it requires is the presence of an appropriate antecedent address in *any* domain or subdomain (in this case, the extensional subdomain under negation). This is quite different from presupposition projection, which is restricted by conditions of overall semantic consistency. That no clash arises in (3a) is simply due to the fact that the predicate *invent* (in the sense of 'pretend there to be') is intensional with respect to its object term, so that it does not need an antecedent for *it*_i in the extensional truth domain. Analogous analyses apply to (3b,c,d).

Of course, this analysis requires an ontology that allows for nonexisting, virtual entities, which is something most Western philosophers, burdened as they are with the legacy left by Russell and Quine, have great difficulty with. They ought, however, to consider that this is apparently the way humans naturally construct their ontologies, as appears from the fact that humans refer to and quantify over virtual entities with the same ease and naturalness as they do with regard to actually existing ones (see Chapter 2 of Seuren 2009 for extensive discussion). Refusing to admit an intensional ontology means *inter alia* the inability to explain the coherence of sentences like (3a–d).

Closer inspection quickly reveals that there are many cases where anaphora resolution proceeds without a hitch but where incoherence arises owing to the blocking of presupposition projection. Consider the following examples :

- (4)
- a. !John_i pretends that he has left but he_i has come back.
 - b. ! I know John_i hasn't left, so he_i must have come back.
 - c. !John never had a wife_i. He simply divorced her_i.
 - d. ! If John_i pretends to have children_j, they_j must be staying with his_i sister.

The first clauses in (4a,b) entail that John hasn't left while the second clauses presuppose that he has, owing to the predicate *back*. This clash of entailments causes the incoherence of (4a,b). Yet there is no problem with the resolution of the anaphor *he*_i in the second clauses of (4a,b), which is an external anaphor with *John* as its antecedent.

Similarly in (4c), where the first clause denies a presupposition of the second. Yet there is no problem with the anaphoric pronoun *her_i*, which resolves into *a wife* in the first clause. In (4d), the antecedent clause entails that John has no children, whereas the consequent clause presupposes that he has, owing to the fact that the predicate *stay with one's sister* is extensional with regard to its subject term and *must* is a 'hole', giving rise to existential import. The antecedent and consequent clauses thus have conflicting entailments, which violates a basic condition for the coherence of conditionals. But the resolution of the (donkey) anaphor *they_j* is entirely unproblematic.

Further examples illustrating free anaphoric access across subdomains are:

- (5) a. John has no children. So *they* (*the poor creatures*) can't be on vacation.
 b. If Juan had any children, *they* (*the poor creatures*) would speak Spanish.
 c. A farmer who has no donkey can't feed *it* (*the animal*).
 d. A farmer who has no donkey can still dream about *it* (*the animal*).

(The possibility of epithet anaphora (see Seuren 2010: 291, 296–297) shows that these are anyway cases of external and not of bound-variable anaphora, which precludes an analysis in terms of Geach (1969, 1972).

This suffices to show the untenability of the position defended by Van der Sandt, Geurts and Beaver, and all too easily adopted by other adherents of DRT. But there is more. Presuppositions are recoverable from their carrier sentences on account of the lexical meanings of the predicates inducing them, while no such help is available for anaphors. Thus, while (6a) allows for the conclusion *So he was married*, no corresponding counterpart is available for (6b):

- (6) a. Harold wanted to get divorced. (So he was married!)
 b. Harold wanted to see her. (Who?)

Van der Sandt's reply to this argument is that (Van der Sandt 1992: 341)

... unlike pronouns, <presuppositions> contain descriptive content which enables them to accommodate an antecedent in case discourse does not provide one.

But this won't do. The difference is that presuppositions consist of *propositional* content while definite descriptions have *descriptive* content. Epithet pronouns, as has been shown, also have descriptive content, yet such descriptive content does not suffice to provide an antecedent:

- (7) Harold wanted to see the old girl. (Who?)

We must conclude that Van der Sandt's claim that (Van der Sandt 1992: 341):

... presuppositions are just anaphors. They can be treated by basically the same mechanism that handles the resolution of pronominal and anaphoric expressions.

is confused and bizarre. Not only does it require notional obfuscation for it to be palatable to outsiders to presupposition theory, such as the school of DRT-practitioners,

it also confuses the phenomenon itself with a mechanism associated with it. In the end, DRT still lacks an account of presupposition. Anaphora is anaphora and presupposition is presupposition. The twain meet only in so far as they link arms in context-driven utterance interpretation.

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