

Anaphoric Deflationism: Truth and Reference

LAUREN HARTZELL

Dorothy Grover outlines the prosentential theory of truth in which truth predicates have an anaphoric function that is analogous to pronouns, where anaphoric is defined as obtaining meaning from an antecedent. There is no distinct property of truth because the word “true” cannot be separated from its function in prosentences. All prosentences contain the phrase “...is true” and occupy the position that declarative sentences occupy in language. Robert Brandom expresses the prosentential theory of truth by asserting that the phrase “...is true” acts as a sentence forming operator. Grover wants to assert that it is not necessary to be deflationary about reference in order to be deflationary about truth. Brandom, however, believes that a pronominal theory of reference follows from the prosentential theory of truth.

I argue that the prosentential theory of truth must accept the pronominal theory of reference in order to maintain an anaphoric account of truth. I call the theory that encompasses the prosentential theory of truth and the pronominal theory of reference anaphoric deflationism because truth and reference are described as anaphoric linguistic tools in order to demonstrate that these concepts are not metaphysical properties. I also explicate a modification to the anaphoric deflationist’s account of truth and reference by explaining that the words “truth” and “reference” have anaphoric functions in the same way “true” and “refers” have anaphoric functions. This strengthens the argument against substantive truth and reference properties by accounting for these words as having only intralinguistic meaning.

I. Dorothy Grover and the Prosentential Theory of Truth

The prosentential theory of truth as presented by Dorothy Grover explains the use of the word “true” in language in terms of prosentences. Prosentences are related to sentences in the same way pronouns are related to pronouns. Both prosentences

and pronouns belong to the larger class of proforms, which are used to obtain generality. On this account, the word “true” has no meaning apart from its function in prosentences. Truth talk therefore only requires a truth predicate (i.e. prosentences), but no truth property. All truth talk can be expressed in terms of a prosentential reading of “true” and “false.” Prosentences are not redundant because they serve an anaphoric function, but they are content redundant because of the nature of anaphors. An anaphor is a word, phrase or sentence that obtains meaning by referring to a preceding word or group of words. Prosentences obtain meaning from preceding statements, making them anaphors. It is important to identify this referring relationship as intralinguistic (as opposed to extralinguistic) because this distinguishes anaphors as having an indirect relationship to their original referent. Thus, prosentences as anaphors are inheritors of meaning; they acquire their referent from another expression. Grounded inheritors have referents that acquire propositional content independently. Therefore, prosentences are grounded only when their anaphoric referents have propositional content, and they can acquire propositional content only indirectly through their referents.¹

The two categories of prosentences are “lazy” prosentences such as “that is true” and quantificational prosentences such as “it is true.” Both versions of prosentences can be expressed in different forms because their verbs can be modified and their subjects can be manipulated. Prosentences involving the phrase “that is true” are easily seen as functioning in the same way as pronouns. This type of prosentence is analogous to a pronoun of laziness. The phrase “that is true” is used as an anaphoric substitute to other phrases or sentences. Consider the following:

Marion:	<i>Most college students do not get enough sleep.</i>
Robert:	<i>That is true, but you have to recognize that such generalizations do not apply to all students. I always make an effort to get nine hours of sleep.</i>

In this example Robert did not want to repeat everything Marion said, so he summarized her statement by saying “that is true.” It is important to note that the phrase “that is true” is a prosentence

that holds the place of another content filled sentence. "That is true" is an anaphor with the referent "Most college students do not get enough sleep." Robert's prosentence is a simplified placeholder for Marion's statement in an analogous way to "she" being a placeholder for Marion in the following sentences about Marion. *Marion loves to volunteer her time at the Children's Hospital. She is a very compassionate woman.* "That is true" is a prosentence of laziness in the same way "she" is a pronoun of laziness. Prosentences of laziness do not assert, deny, or consider anything new. The fact that they are content redundant illustrates their role in language. They are an anaphoric mechanism just as pronouns are anaphoric mechanisms.

Quantificational prosentences involve the phrase "it is true." These prosentences are used to generalize sentence positions much like pronouns are used to generalize nominal positions. The phrase "it is true" is used to corroborate its antecedent even though it is content redundant with this antecedent because it is an anaphor of the antecedent. In, *She is Lexi*, the pronoun "she" refers to Lexi. "She" is anaphorically connected to "Lexi." In this case the subject and object refer to the same physical thing, but the subject, "she," is related to the object, "Lexi," by an intralinguistic relationship. "Lexi," however, has an extralinguistic relationship with Lexi the person. Similarly in, *it is true that Lexi loves ice cream*, the prosentence "it is true" has as its antecedent the very statement it is supporting. In this case, "it is true" refers to Lexi's love of ice cream, making "Lexi loves ice cream" its antecedent referent. "It is true" is not redundant because it serves to emphasize the statement "Lexi loves ice cream." It is, however, content redundant.

Quantificational prosentences are able to emphasize or justify because they can have more complex antecedents than the antecedents with which they are presented. The reason the use of the phrase "it is true" is a prosentence is that it acts as a placeholder for all the possible justifications of the primary sentence. Consider the following:

Robert:	<i>It is true that water is composed of H₂O.</i>
Marion:	<i>Is that really true? How do you know that?</i>
Robert:	<i>Scientists have proven it experimentally; that is how I know it is true.</i>

The reason Robert does not simply say that water is composed of H_2O is because he wants to indicate that he is justified in making his statement. The original antecedent of "It is true" is "water is composed of H_2O ." When pressed about how he knows this, Robert admits that it is because scientists have proven water to be composed of H_2O that he claimed the statement to be "true." The prosentence "it is true" has a more complex antecedent in Robert's second statement that includes the original antecedent in addition to "Scientists have proven it experimentally." When a statement aligns with one's knowledge, the phrase "it is true" can be attached to the statement to indicate that such knowledge exists. The stated antecedent and referent to the prosentence can be expanded to include the other knowledge about the statement. Quantificational prosentences, therefore, are more complex anaphoric mechanisms than lazy prosentences. They appear redundant because their simple anaphoric referents are presented at the same time as the prosentence, but are not redundant because they imply the possibility of more complex referents.

In this light, quantificational prosentences can be seen as analogous to lazy prosentences. "It is true" acts as a placeholder in the same way "that is true" acts as a placeholder. The difference is that "that is true" refers to a specific antecedent, while "it is true" refers to a specific antecedent that can be expanded to include other knowledge statements. All prosentences keep discussions involving truth predicates at the object-language or intralinguistic level. The word "true" cannot exist independent from a prosentence and therefore cannot affect what is said in language. If extralinguistic subjects are being discussed, then "truth" does not factor into the discussion other than as a tool of language, as a member of a truth predicate prosentence. Prosentences that include the word "true" have anaphoric functions; they cannot participate as an object in discussion. "Truth" is neutral with respect to philosophical questions in the same way that pronouns are neutral with respect to such questions. Thus, the prosentential theory of truth is deflationary in its denial of truth as a distinct property.

II. Robert Brandom and the Pronominal Theory of Reference

In order to understand Robert Brandom's pronominal theory of

reference, it is necessary to understand his formulation of the prosentential theory of truth. While agreeing with Grover's analysis of prosentential theory of truth in general, Brandom points out an important feature of quantificational prosentences. The reason the prosentential theory of truth is not a disquotational or redundancy theory is that it does not separate the referring property of "that" from the referring property of quantificational prosentences. When the phrase "...is true" is understood as a prosentence forming operator, "...is true" is seen as forming anaphoric sentences where this phrase cannot be separated from the whole prosentence. This means that "...is true" functions as an operator in a similar way to existential and universal quantifiers in logic. The prosentence forming operator "...is true" is an anaphoric operator because all its resulting prosentences have an anaphoric function. Brandom's notion of the prosentence forming operator does not differ substantially from Grover's account of the prosentential theory of truth, because they both assign intralinguistic referring powers to prosentences as a whole. Using the notion of a prosentence forming operator is another way of understanding the role of "true" in prosentences.¹ Brandom's move to label the prosentential operator allows him to explain the function of "refers" in an analogous way to the function of "true." In order to understand his analogy, however, some features of language must be understood.

There are two forms of reference, word-world or extralinguistic reference and word-word or intralinguistic reference. Anaphoric or intralinguistic reference is often taken for granted as being guaranteed extralinguistic reference through indirect description. In anaphoric chains of intralinguistic reference, however, some elements have a purely intralinguistic referential function and no independent extralinguistic reference. The following is an example of an anaphoric chain: *Robert went to the store on Saturday. Marion helped him unpack what he bought. They realized he had forgotten something.* There are three areas of variation to understand in tokens of anaphoric chains. Anaphoric tokens can be either initiating or dependent. "Robert" is an initiating token, while "he" is a dependent token (of "Robert"). Anaphoric tokens are either type-substitution-invariant types, meaning they do not vary in reference through an anaphoric chain, or cotypically nonintersubstitutable with referents varying

from token to token. Anaphoric tokens are also either lexically simple with words that are nouns, or lexically complex with phrases that are nouns.² Pronouns are cotypically nonintersubstitutable anaphoric dependents.

Brandom sees “refers” as acting as a pronoun forming operator when its anaphoric function is understood. When sentences containing a form of “refers” are paraphrased such that “refers” only occurs inside indirect descriptions, its functioning can be explained in terms of a complex pronoun. “Refers” is applied to a token with a specified antecedent resulting in a lexically complex pronoun including the word “refers.” This means that “refers” always becomes part of a lexically complex, cotypically nonintersubstitutable anaphoric dependent. Thus “refers” is used to express anaphorically indirect definite descriptions. Consider the following:

Marion:	<i>Lexi's friend seems really nice.</i>
Robert:	<i>Which friend?</i>
Marion:	<i>I do not remember her name, but I was referring to the one who helped Lexi study for her chemistry exam.</i>

The phrase “referring to the one who helped Lexi study for her chemistry exam” is a lexically complex pronoun. This clarifies “refers” role as a pronoun forming operator because it always becomes part of a lexically complex pronoun in language. A similar relationship exists between “...is true” as a prosentence forming operator and its resulting position in language as part of prosentences. This means that reference is an anaphoric tool much like truth and that there is not an extralinguistic reference property. The same discussion about truth as a linguistic tool applies to reference as a linguistic tool.

III. Anaphoric Deflationists on Truth and Reference

It has been established that the pronominal theory of reference is modeled after the prosentential theory of truth, but the question of whether or not they necessitate one another has not yet been addressed. Grover explains prosentences as anaphors, making prosentences anaphoric referents that obtain meaning from antecedents. In discussing truth, therefore, Grover is able to avoid a discussion of extralinguistic reference. Her discussion on

truth centers on anaphoric, intralinguistic reference, keeping her discussion at the level of object-language. Truth is seen only in the confines of intralinguistic use and therefore it is denied that an extralinguistic or metalinguistic truth property exists at all. Grover does not deny that truth is a useful linguistic concept. Rather, she says that language requires a theory of meaning and that a prosentential "true" helps give language meaning by drawing attention to what sentences are being used and referred to in different contexts (i.e. "true" is an anaphoric tool).²

Grover emphasizes that the prosentential theory of truth does not require a specific theory about extralinguistic or metalinguistic reference. She goes as far as to indicate that one could hold the prosentential theory of truth and also hold a realist conception of extralinguistic reference.³ With the introduction of the pronominal theory of reference, however, Grover has to accept that an anaphoric account of truth necessitates an anaphoric account of reference. Grover attempts to isolate her anaphoric deflationary move to truth, while Brandom expands this idea to reference. Because Grover identifies anaphora in language, and her theory of truth rests on the existence of anaphora, she must accept all accounts of anaphora in language. Brandom utilizes the same logic to explicate the pronominal theory of reference that Grover used to explicate the prosentential theory of truth. Grover must therefore accept the pronominal theory of reference in order to maintain her position about truth. For this reason, I call philosophers who support any single anaphoric theory an anaphoric deflationist because they must accept all anaphoric theories. Thus, Grover and Brandom are anaphoric deflationists.³

Once the existence of intralinguistic, anaphoric referential relationships are revealed in language, it becomes necessary to identify all anaphoric linguistic concepts for any of these concepts to be taken seriously. By identifying "truth" as a solely anaphoric mechanism, Grover and Brandom invite an investigation as to the existence of any and all other anaphoric mechanisms. Brandom's explication of "refers" as an anaphoric operator necessitates that anyone who accepts the prosentential theory of truth must adopt the pronominal theory of reference as well. The question becomes not, "do anaphoric interpretations of 'true' and 'refers' require one another?", because they do. Rather, what other anaphoric mechanisms in language remain to be

identified? Kirkham points out that the prosentential theory of truth leads to questions about the roles of other predicates such as “is surprising” and “is profound.”⁴ Rather than liberating us from false properties, anaphoric deflationists seem to trap us in language such that it is difficult to discern what can and cannot be interpreted anaphorically with a deflationary result.

Grover says that the prosentential theory of truth does not determine extralinguistic reference, but when it is understood that she must accept the pronominal theory of reference it appears that she can no longer even use the word “reference” meaningfully by her own anaphoric deflationary logic. Brandom admits that the prosentential theory of truth and the pronominal theory of reference deny any notions of substantive truth and reference, but at the same time cannot account for these notions. Truth and reference have been explained away by the anaphoric account, but it seems that the reason extralinguistic reference is no longer seen as a property is because the word “refers” can only be used intralinguistically. Part of the issue anaphoric deflationism must deal with in respect to substantive truth and reference are the words “truth” and “reference.” The prosentential theory of truth and the pronominal theory of reference are both semantic theories, but they only account for the words “true” and “refers.” I believe that when the nouns “truth” and “reference” are incorporated into the anaphoric account of truth and reference, at least part of the objection against anaphoric deflationism can be dismissed.

The prosentential theory of truth can incorporate the word “truth” in terms of prosentences in the same way “true” is seen in terms of prosentences. When “...is true” is understood as a prosentence forming operator, “...is the truth” can be seen in the same light. The prosentences *it is true* and *that is true* can be reworded as *it is the truth* and *that is the truth*. Replacing “true” with “the truth” does not change the meaning of the prosentence, but rather the emphasis. Consider the following:

Robert:	<i>It is true that water is composed of H₂O.</i>
Marion:	<i>Is that really true? How do you know that?</i>
Robert:	<i>Scientists have proven it experimentally; that is how I know it is the truth.</i>

The only difference between this example and the initial version

of this example are Robert's final words. Changing his last prosentence from "it is true" to "it is the truth" does not change the anaphoric functions of these prosentences. Rather, the change only places a greater emphasis on his belief that the antecedent to the prosentences, water being composed of H_2O , is grounded. This example illustrates that "truth" is used anaphorically in language in the same way as "true."

"Refers" is understood as always being part of a lexically complex pronoun in language. "Reference" can be understood in the same way, though it will usually be a member of even more complex pronouns. Consider the following:

Marion:	<i>Lexi's friend seems really nice.</i>
Robert:	<i>Which friend?</i>
Marion:	<i>I do not remember her name, but I was making a reference to the one who helped Lexi study for her chemistry exam.</i>

The lexically complex pronoun in which "referring" is used in the first instance of this example is manipulated such that "reference" is used here instead. This enables the pronominal theory of reference to include both "reference" and forms of "refers." The anaphoric function of the complex pronoun is the same in each instance of this example; it is merely expressed with different words.

With the words "truth" and "reference" incorporated into anaphoric deflationism, the argument for substantive truth and reference becomes even weaker. Previously anaphoric deflationary accounts failed to explain the words "truth" and "reference" in language because they only explained forms of "true" and "refers." "Truth" and "reference" indicate substantive properties more than "true" and "refers" do, because they are the primary nominal concepts from which their cognates develop. With the primary linguistic concepts of truth and reference explained as anaphoric linguistic tools, the case against the existence of truth and reference as metaphysical properties is strengthened.

It seems unfair, however, that the anaphoric deflationary argument against discussion of substantive truth and reference properties is the fact that the words "truth" and "reference" used in these discussions are not valid terms to use when discussing

extralinguistic notions. Anaphoric deflationism seems to trap us in intralinguistic language. In other words, my worry is that the premise of anaphoric deflationism, the existence of anaphora in language, does not allow for coherent arguments against anaphoric deflationism, since no one is able to escape language and its inherent anaphors. It is a contradiction to say that something extralinguistic gives meaning to linguistic concepts when the word we use for this meaning relationship has an anaphoric function in language. Anaphoric deflationism does not address substantive truth and reference notions, but its reason for doing this is part of its premise.

Notes

¹ See Grover, 1992 for a full account of the prosentential theory of truth, and Grover, 2001 for an updated condensed version of the theory.

² See Brandom, 1994, chapter 5, section III-4.

³ See Brandom, 1984, section II.

⁴ See Grover, 1990 and Grover, 1992.

⁵ Grover, 1992: 34.

⁶ It may be possible for Grover to accept a non-deflationary account of extralinguistic reference if this theory did not contain "reference vocabulary" that could be interpreted anaphorically. As indicated later in this paper, however, it may not be possible to use any "reference vocabulary" in a non-anaphoric way.

⁷ Kirkham, 1992: 328-329.

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