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Anne Reboul

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**What (if anything) is accessibility?  
A relevance-oriented criticism of Ariel's  
Accessibility Theory of referring expressions**

Anne Reboul  
C.R.I.N.-C.N.R.S. & I.N.R.I.A.-Lorraine

## **1. Introduction**

This paper is not directly related to Functional Grammar in as much as it does not discuss a theory which has been developed inside Functional Grammar. Yet, the theory which it discusses, Accessibility Theory, partially supports what appears to be one of the major tenets of Functional Grammar, that is the thesis that Pragmatics, which deals with the use of language, should be integrated in Grammar. This, in my opinion, neglects the fact that the use of language cannot be entirely dealt with at the level of the sentence and ignores the problems of the relations between language and reality, which, obviously, cannot be a matter of grammar. This is especially true of referring expressions, which are the subject of Accessibility Theory.

In her book, *Assessing Noun Phrase Antecedents* (Ariel 1990), Ariel defends the thesis that to account for the use of referring expressions it is necessary to have a theory of accessibility and proceeds to outline such a theory. This paper challenges her analysis on three main counts:

- (i) According to Ariel, referring expressions are linguistically marked to indicate the accessibility of their antecedents. I argue that she fails to prove this point.
- (ii) Furthermore, I argue that within relevance theory one can account for the use of referring expressions, if one considers both the semantic content of such expressions and the relationship between their semantic content and their referring ability. If this is right, a linguistic marking of accessibility is not merely unnecessary: it would also violate Grice's modified principle of Occam's razor.
- (iii) Ariel pays lip service to the fact that accessibility should be considered a complex notion and defined in such a way that what is marked is not accessibility of the antecedent to the hearer *simpliciter*, but what the speaker believes to be the

(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.<sup>2</sup>

accessibility of the antecedent to the hearer. She also seems to accept that accessibility should be defined so as to take account of point of view. However, the notion of accessibility which she actually uses is simple and one-dimensional, based only on the criterion of distance.

I begin with a summary of Ariel's book, which outlines her main thesis, the relationship which she proposes between Relevance Theory and Accessibility Theory, her scale of accessibility and her method for constructing such a scale. I then show that her arguments for constructing such a scale are not as satisfying as they appear to be and that accounting for the use of referring expressions does not necessarily require the use of such an Accessibility theory. Finally, I show that the notion of accessibility which Ariel uses throughout her book is far from convincing, firstly because it neglects the referring ability of noun phrases and secondly because it fails to account for the use of referring expressions by not taking adequate account of the question of point of view.

## **2. Accessibility Theory: the linguistic marking of accessibility**

Ariel begins with the observation (by now generally accepted, one would hope) that utterances can only be interpreted relative to a context. She adopts Relevance theory to account both for the notion of context and the relationship between the utterance and the context. As is well known, relevance is defined relative to contextual effects and to processing effort and, roughly speaking, accessibility concerns the effort side. Ariel's hypothesis is that, in order to minimalise processing effort, it can be useful to indicate conventionally where the hearer should go to find the propositions which will constitute the context. She rejects the hypothesis that what is linguistically encoded should be a "geographical" area where one would find the relevant proposition; rather, according to her, what is encoded is the degree of accessibility of the antecedent of the referring expression. Thus, she considers that the dividing line between reference and anaphora should be abandoned and that all referring expressions should be considered anaphoric to a large extent, regardless of whether they do or do not refer<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Not all so-called referring expressions do refer: there is a general consensus that indefinite descriptions do not refer, i.e. they do not

It is important to realise that Ariel's account is not devised as an alternative to Relevance Theory. Rather, she says quite explicitly and forcefully that it is devised to be a complement to Relevance Theory, enabling it to account fully for the use and choice of referring expressions. She draws a parallel between her Accessibility Theory and Blakemore's account of connectives (see Blakemore 1987), according to which such expressions indicate linguistically how the utterance in which they occur can best achieve optimal relevance. Ariel conceives her own Accessibility Theory as another such complement to Relevance Theory<sup>2</sup>.

Ariel's main goal of is to indicate which degree of accessibility each type of referring expression conventionally encodes. To achieve this, she lists four factors which play a role in the accessibility of the antecedent:

- (i) The *distance* between the antecedent and the noun phrase.
- (ii) The *competition* which occurs when several preceding noun phrases could be the antecedent.
- (iii) *Saliency*.
- (iv) *Unity* (the fact that the antecedent occurs in the same frame/world/point of view/segment of paragraph).

In her book, Ariel uses the only quantifiable criterion of the four, i.e. distance. She counts the occurrences of a given type of noun-phrase in the same sentence/the following sentence/the same paragraph/another paragraph as the antecedent, using a relatively small corpus of written fiction and non-fiction (journalism) texts. Perhaps unsurprisingly, she winds up with the following scale of accessibility:

#### (1) Accessibility Marking Scale

Low Accessibility

a Full name + modifier

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pick out a specific object in the world. In the same way, definite descriptions may or may not refer, depending on their occasions of use and on the speaker's intentions.

<sup>2</sup> The present criticism of Ariel's Accessibility theory does not apply in any way to Blakemore's excellent work.

(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.

- b Full (“namy”<sup>3</sup>) name
- c Long definite description
- d Short definite description
- e Last name
- f First name
- g Distal demonstrative + modifier
- h Proximal demonstrative + modifier
- i Distal demonstrative (+ NP)
- j Proximal demonstrative (+ NP)
- k Stressed pronoun + gesture
- l Stressed pronoun
- m Unstressed pronoun
- n Cliticized pronoun
- o Extremely High Accessibility Markers (gaps, including pro, PRO and *wh* traces, reflexives, and Agreement)

### High Accessibility

Ariel’s way of looking at referring expressions means that some noun phrases are left out of the preceding accessibility scale, namely first and second person pronouns and indefinite descriptions. I will return to this problem below.

### 3. Criticising the linguistic marking of accessibility

The main thesis of Accessibility theory is that accessibility is linguistically marked: it is part of the semantic content of each type of referring expression that the antecedent of the expression is to be found at such and such a degree of accessibility. This linguistic marking of accessibility is precisely the feature of Accessibility Theory which, according to Ariel, makes it a natural complement of Relevance Theory. She also defends the thesis that the accessibility scale is, *mutatis mutandis*, linguistically universal and that its universality is to be accounted for in terms of its non-arbitrariness. The actual degree of accessibility encoded by each type of referring expression is not arbitrary, but depends on three factors: *informativity*, *rigidity* and *attenuation*<sup>4</sup>. It could be thought

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<sup>3</sup> Ariel’s terminology.

<sup>4</sup> The informativity of a given referring expression depends on the quantity of information given by the referring expression; its rigidity depends on the fact that it does always refer to the same thing, regardless of context (proper names are the standard example of rigid referring expressions; its attenuation depends on its phonological form and on the stress or absence of stress.

(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.<sup>5</sup>

that the thesis of the universality of the accessibility scale contradicts the thesis of linguistic marking, which presumes that the degree of accessibility encoded by this or that referring expression is arbitrary to a degree. In fact, Ariel claims that the two theses are not inconsistent. The degree of accessibility marked by a given referring expression is, on the whole, not arbitrary but explicable through the three criteria of informativity, rigidity and attenuation, while on a smaller scale some degree of arbitrariness is manifest. This is true of the difference in accessibility between definite descriptions and the corresponding demonstrative noun phrases, between distal and proximal demonstratives and between stressed and unstressed pronouns. What is more, according to Ariel, Relevance Theory would always favour the choice of a proper name to any other referring expression<sup>5</sup>.

I believe that the thesis of the universality of accessibility scale and the thesis of the conventional (and hence arbitrary) marking of degrees of accessibility are inconsistent and, what is more, the supposed arbitrariness of some details in the accessibility scale stems from a misguided view of what informativeness consists in. To show this, I will examine the three pairs of referring expressions for which Ariel claims that the criterion of informativity should not work, i.e. definite descriptions and corresponding demonstrative noun phrases, distal and proximal demonstratives, stressed and unstressed pronouns.

#### **4. Definite descriptions and corresponding demonstrative noun phrases, distal and proximal demonstratives, stressed and unstressed pronouns**

Consider the following examples<sup>6</sup>:

- (2) a. A plane crashed yesterday in New York. *This plane* flew everyday from Miami to New York.

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<sup>5</sup> For reasons of space, I will not discuss this preposterous claim here, except to say that there is absolutely no foundation that I can see for it. The justifications invoked for it by Ariel - proper names are shorter than other referring expressions and are rigid, i.e. unambiguous - are certainly not conclusive: in most languages, proper names are longer than pronouns and Relevance Theory insists on the fact that communication is far from a failsafe process.

<sup>6</sup> Adapted from Kleiber 1990.

(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.<sup>6</sup>

b. ?A plane crashed in New York yesterday. *The plane* flew everyday from Miami to New York.

Just as Accessibility Theory predicts, (2b) is not quite as good as (2a). Yet, according to Ariel, the definite description *the plane* and the demonstrative noun phrase *this plane* give exactly the same information. Thus, it is not a difference in informativity together with Relevance Theory which accounts for the fact that the demonstrative noun phrase is better in (2) than the definite description. It would not account either for the (related) fact that demonstrative noun phrases encode a higher degree of accessibility than definite descriptions do.

Let us move on to distal and proximal demonstratives and examine the following examples.

- (3) a. A plane crashed yesterday in New York. *This plane* flew everyday from Miami to New York.  
b. ?A plane crashed yesterday in New York. *That plane* flew everyday from Miami to New York.

Once again, (3a) is better than (3b) and this is predicted by Accessibility Theory. Once again, the two demonstrative noun phrases give, according to Ariel, the same amount of information. Thus, there is a difference in the degree of accessibility encoded by distal and proximal demonstratives and this difference cannot be accounted for on the basis of informativity and Relevance Theory.

Let us now consider the last pair of referring expressions indicated by Ariel in which some degree of arbitrariness is manifest as far as the degree of accessibility encoded is concerned:

- (4) a. Jane<sub>i</sub> kissed Mary<sub>j</sub>, and then she<sub>i</sub> kissed Harry.  
b. Jane<sub>i</sub> kissed Mary<sub>j</sub>, and then SHE<sub>j</sub> kissed Harry.  
(5) a. Jane<sub>i</sub> kissed Mary<sub>j</sub>, and then Harry kissed her<sub>j</sub>.  
b. Jane<sub>i</sub> kissed Mary<sub>j</sub>, and then Harry kissed HER<sub>i</sub>.

(4a) and (4b), as well as (5a) and (5b), differ only in that the pronoun is not stressed in the (a) versions, whereas it is stressed in the (b) versions. This difference does have an interpretive effect as the unstressed pronoun is interpreted as coreferential with Jane in (4a) and with Mary in (5a), whereas the stressed pronoun is interpreted as coreferential with Mary in (4b) and with Jane in

(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional*<sup>7</sup>  
*grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.

(5b). It should be noted that the coreference established in the stressed version is not the “natural” one, which occurs in the unstressed versions. Thus, stressed pronouns seem to mark a less accessible, because less natural, antecedent than do unstressed pronouns. As pronouns, whether stressed or unstressed give the same and rather limited amount of information, this difference between stressed and unstressed pronouns cannot be accounted for on the basis of informativity plus Relevance theory.

## 5. Informativity and Ariel’s argument

Such is the case made by Ariel for the linguistic marking of accessibility. It should be plain by now that this case is based on the same type of argument for each pair of referring expressions. The argument has the following form:

*First premise:*

Two different linguistic forms indicate differing degrees of accessibility.

*Second premise:*

These two different linguistic forms transmit exactly the same information.

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*Conclusion:*

The difference in accessibility is linked arbitrarily to linguistic form.

To criticise Ariel’s argument, it must be shown either that her conclusion does not follow from the two premises, or that one at least of her hypotheses does not apply to the examples of referring expressions which she uses. The conclusion seems to follow quite well from the premises, so the only option left is to contest one or both of the premises. There does not seem to be any doubt of the fact, reflected in the first premise, that definite descriptions and demonstrative noun phrases, distal and proximal demonstratives are different linguistic forms, though some people might contest that stressed and unstressed pronouns are different linguistic forms. Whoever is right about this last point, I do not intend to contest the first premise. On the other hand, I do not believe that the second premise is valid as it stands and to show why not I return to the three pairs of referring expressions.

Thus, we return to the difference in informativity between definite descriptions and demonstrative noun phrases. How can *the*



(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.<sup>8</sup>

*plane* and *this plane* be said to transmit the same information? The common factor between the two referring expressions is the noun *plane*, which, according to most theories about reference, stipulates the conditions which a thing in the world must satisfy in order to be the referent of the expression: note that this is truth-conditional information. Thus Ariel establishes identity of information on the basis of truth-conditional information alone and does not seem to take into account the - possibly non-truth-conditional - information provided by the determiner. It appears, then, that the second premise of Ariel's argument must be modified to take into account the restricted information which she takes into account. It would then become:

*Second premise:*

These two different linguistic forms transmit exactly the same truth-conditional information.

Does this, then, prove Ariel's conclusion? I think that she needs a further premise, but I'll come to this later on.

Let's now examine distal and proximal demonstratives. Do *This plane* and *That plane* transmit the same information? The answer is exactly the same here as for definite descriptions and demonstrative noun phrases and Ariel's second premise must be modified just as before.

Stressed and unstressed pronouns raise a new difficulty, linked to the question of whether or not they should be considered as linguistic forms (rather than, let us say, pragmatic forms). It should be clear that if they are not considered linguistic forms, the problem of the validity of Ariel's argument does not arise because, on her account, it is the linguistic form which linguistically encodes the accessibility of the antecedent. So, let us take the hypothesis that stressed and unstressed pronouns are in fact two different linguistic forms. What could be said now of Ariel's second premise as far as stressed and unstressed pronouns are concerned? It appears, now as before, that the second premise should be amended to account for the fact that only truth-conditional information is taken into account<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> This premise applies regardless of the analysis of third person pronouns which has been chosen. If a non-truth-conditional account is favoured, then the pronouns, whether stressed or unstressed, transmit the same truth-conditional information, that

Thus, as we have just seen, the notion of informativity used by Ariel concerns only truth-conditional information. Is her argument, with the amended second premise, valid? Or, in other words, do the two premises entails the conclusion? As far as I can see, this would be true only if a further and third premise were added:

*Third premise*

No non-truth-conditional information, apart from accessibility, is conventionally transmitted by these two linguistic forms.

With the addition of this third premise, Ariel's conclusion does indeed follow. But such an addition is fatal to her argument, as it amounts to begging the question: if the only possible non-truth-conditional information linked to referring expressions is to be the degree of accessibility, then, to be sure, the choice of a given referring expression, when another one had exactly the same (truth-conditional) informativity, can only be explained by the degree of accessibility of the chosen expression. But such a premise says no more than what the conclusion says.

To be sure, showing that an argument is question-begging is far from showing that its conclusion is not true: it does, nonetheless, weaken seriously Ariel's position and surely the burden of proof is on her side. It seems, however, that it might be easy to show that she does not take into account non-truth-

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is to say none; if a truth-conditional account is chosen, then the same truth-conditional information is transmitted by stressed and unstressed pronouns. By the way, it should be noticed that the case of stressed vs. unstressed pronouns is one of the cases where accessibility cannot be reduced to distance, as a glance at examples (4) and (5) shows: the unstressed pronoun in (4a) marks, according to Ariel, higher accessibility than does the stressed pronoun in (4b). Accessibility is generally assessed by distance between NP and antecedent. Yet, in (4a), the unstressed pronoun is co-referential with *Jane*, that is with the possible antecedent which is farthest from the pronoun. The reverse occurs in examples (5). Thus, assessing accessibility only on the basis of distance, which is Ariel's practice, does not always support her claim that unstressed pronouns mark higher accessibility than do stressed pronouns (unless, of course, the basis for assessing accessibility is changed).

(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.

conditional information which might not be directly linked to degree of accessibility. This information, typically provided by the determiner in complex noun phrases, is related, in my opinion, to the referring ability of referring expressions.

## 6. Non-truth-conditional information in referring expressions

Ariel provides a wealth of quotations which illustrate her blindness as far as the referring ability of referring expressions is concerned: “Since it is naïve to assume that referring expressions directly refer to physical entities (be they linguistic or other kinds of objects), we must assume that in all cases an addressee looks for antecedents which are themselves mental representations” (Ariel 1990, 6) and “I am suggesting doing away with the referential-anaphoric distinction” (Ibid., 7). There is nothing intrinsically scandalous in what she says in either of the two quotations above. Unfortunately, her way of looking at antecedents as “mental representations” as well as her repudiation of the anaphoric/referential distinction leads her to view all referring expressions, whatever the context of their use, as anaphoric in the most trivial<sup>8</sup> sense and leads her also to view antecedents as things mentioned in the linguistic context, i.e. ultimately as linguistic entities.

In other words, whether Ariel is right or not about the naïvety relative to direct reference<sup>9</sup>, she goes as far as possible in the opposite direction and chooses to ignore that referring expressions can indeed refer and do so fairly frequently. Having chosen to ignore this, her account of referring expressions leaves aside quite a few expressions which should most certainly be included in any account of referring expressions, such as indefinite descriptions and indexicals (most notably the first and second person pronouns); it also ignores the non-truth-conditional indications in referring expressions which have to do with choosing the right referent.

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<sup>8</sup> Which her exclusive use of the distance criterion shows.

<sup>9</sup> I cannot think of a better book on direct reference than François Recanati's *Direct reference: from language to thought*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1993. It would be very nice indeed if all linguists' works on referring expressions could be as “naïve” as this truly beautiful book.

(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.

This is particularly evident in her comparison of distal and proximal demonstratives. According to Ariel, distal demonstratives encode a lower degree of accessibility than proximal demonstratives and this difference in the degree of accessibility encoded does not follow from the information transmitted by either form. If we restrain ourselves to the purely pronominal forms of demonstratives, *this* and *that*, what kind of information do they transmit? It should be remembered, as Ariel does not seem to do, that demonstratives are a highly referential kind of referring expression: in other words, though they can be and frequently are used to refer to entities already mentioned, i.e. anaphorically, they are also quite often used to refer to things present in the physical situation in which the communication takes place. The first thing to note is that they do not convey any kind of truth-conditional information: the only information which they seem to transmit has to do with the relative distance between the speaker and the object designated<sup>10</sup>. There does not seem to be any doubt that, though the difference between distal and proximal demonstratives is much more complex than most accounts say, it has a spatial content which closely parallels that between *here* and *there*. This is certainly true when they are used in a demonstrative way and it certainly cannot be equated with accessibility, though, as I hope to show later, it can explain their respective places in Ariel's Accessibility scale. On the other hand, it seems rather doubtful whether their respective places on the accessibility scale could explain their indication of relative distance from the speaker.

## 7. What (if anything) is accessibility?

What has just been said shows that, not only has Ariel not shown conclusively that accessibility is linguistically marked in referring expressions, but also that there exists non-truth-conditional information provided by referring expressions which her account does not take into account. It also shows that if any kind of accessibility is indicated, directly or indirectly, by referring expressions, it cannot be the simple and monolithic notion which she actually uses. It is interesting to note, by the way, that Ariel herself does notice some facts which should have encouraged her to take more things into account, as in the following sentence:

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<sup>10</sup> It could also be said, in a perspective similar to that of Jean-Claude Milner (see Milner 1982), that they indicate their lack of semantic completeness and the necessity to add to their semantic content, by gesture and/or linguistic context.

(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.

“Note that in English, for example, *that* requires identifiability by both speaker and addressee, whereas *this* sometimes refers to objects accessible only to the speaker” (Ibid., 53). Ariel does not seem to see in her very short discussion of this fact that it argues for a rather different notion of accessibility, one that is oriented more towards reference than anaphora. I would like to add to this fact a second one, which directly bears on one kind of referring expression which Ariel does not even mention, i.e. indefinite descriptions.

It is generally said that indefinite descriptions are not in fact referring expressions at all: in other words, they do not refer. One thing which it is very hard to find in the literature is an explanation of what this claim amounts to. Does it mean that there is no object corresponding to the indefinite description? Or does it mean that the speaker has no particular object in mind, but that any object satisfying the description would be good enough (which is why, until Heim (1982) proposed an alternative account, indefinite descriptions were analysed as existential quantifiers plus predicates)? The first hypothesis is self-evidently absurd, as a glance at example (6) shows:

- (6) a. I was told that a man came around yesterday and asked for me.

The speaker certainly does not mean to indicate the non-existence of the man. Rather, he does not know who the man is. Note that neither does he imply that the man is unknown to his hearer<sup>11</sup>. He could very well go on to say:

- (6) b. Did/do you see/know him by any chance?

This would seem to indicate that indefinite descriptions indicate that the reference of the description is unknown to the speaker, or, in more Russellian terms, that he is not acquainted with it. However, there are examples where, obviously, this would not be true:

- (7) I'm looking for a siamese cat with a squint.

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, the utterance is completely neutral as far as the hearer's knowledge of the referent is concerned.

(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.

If the speaker asks this in a pet-shop, (7) complies well enough with the above analysis, but if he asks this in the middle of the countryside, he is probably looking for his favourite animal, he has a specific object in mind and the analysis above does not apply. In this case, the object designated by the indefinite description is known to the speaker but is certainly not known to the hearer. It could be said, in favour of Ariel's Accessibility theory, that indefinite descriptions do indeed indicate a degree of accessibility, namely zero accessibility. But still the kind of accessibility indicated is evidently not the anaphoric kind which Ariel, avowedly or not, is preoccupied with. Rather, it is a much more reference-oriented one.

It should be noticed that these two examples of what are reference-oriented rather than anaphora-oriented facts also encourage a notion of accessibility which would take into account not only the distance between the referring expression and its "antecedent" but also the knowledge of the speaker and what is mutually manifest to both speaker and hearer. What is indicated in both the choice of *that* rather than *this* and in the choice of an indefinite description is not only the knowledge which the speaker has of the referent but what he takes to be mutually manifest about it.

This discussion leads to a third dimension of accessibility, that is, *point of view*. There has been a large amount of linguistic and non linguistic work on the notion of point of view, concentrating mainly on its use in literature. A very suggestive one in view of what Ariel has to say on point of view and accessibility, is Cantrall's book, *Viewpoint, reflexives and the nature of noun phrases* (Cantrall 1974). According to Ariel's accessibility scale, reflexives rate among the markers of highest accessibility, on a par with gaps, pro and agreement, and they mark higher accessibility than do non-reflexive pronouns. Thus, we should expect that *I, you, he/she/it* will indicate lower accessibility than do *myself, yourself, himself/herself/itself*. Still, according to Ariel, point of view consists mainly in using higher accessibility than the accessibility scale should allow in a given situation, thus indicating empathy with the person whose point of view is represented in the sentence. If this is true, point of view is primarily a derived pragmatic fact, which must be seen as coming from the violation of the linguistically marked accessibility scale. In this case, where the choice of reflexives over simple pronouns indicates point of view,

(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.

point of view could only appear when both linguistic forms are grammatical.

Some Cantrall's examples, where both the simple and the reflexive pronoun are possible, seem to justify the thesis that point of view **is** a matter of choosing a marker of higher rather than lower accessibility:

- (8) a. There is a picture of me on the mantle.  
b. There is a picture of myself on the mantle.

Cantrall comments on them in the following way: "[ (8a) ] is used where the addressee is in view of the mantle or likely to be, and [ (8b) ] is being used to describe a scene which the addressee is never likely to see" (Cantrall 1974, 94). This reduces point of view, here, to the simplest kind, namely perception and visual identification: in (8a), the point of view is or may be that of the hearer, while in (8b), it can only be that of the speaker, as the hearer, according to Cantrall, is never supposed to be in a position to identify the picture.

How does Cantrall's interpretation of examples (8) match Ariel's account of point of view? The answer is simple: it does not. Indeed, according to Ariel, point of view is the result of choosing a marker of higher accessibility when a marker of lower accessibility should have been used. Her whole account of accessibility makes it hearer-oriented. However, reflexives, and most particularly first and second person reflexives, are difficult to assess in this way. When the speaker uses a first person reflexive, he probably indicates higher accessibility to himself; when the speaker uses a second person reflexive, he probably indicates higher accessibility to his hearer; and when the speaker uses a third person reflexive, he probably indicates higher accessibility to a third party, and to neither his hearer nor himself. Thus, (8a) uses the form most accessible to the hearer (given the intended referent), i.e. the simple pronoun, while (8b) uses the form most accessible to the speaker. This does confirm Cantrall's interpretation of (8a) and (8b), but it certainly does not tally with Ariel's account of point of view.

What is worse, Cantrall has quite a few examples where both forms are not available and where the impossible one seems to be ruled out by considerations of point of view:

(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.

(9) a. Sam said that his daughter believes that this is a picture of him.

b. \*Sam said that his daughter believes that this is a picture of himself.<sup>12</sup>

In this case, the simple pronoun and the reflexive pronoun are not both possible: only the former can occur in (9). This indicates that the variation between simple and reflexive pronoun is not entirely free, but it certainly does not indicate that something other than point of view occurs in this sentence. In (9), as in (8), point of view reduces to identification and (11a) attributes identification to Sam's daughter, thus precluding the reflexive. As Cantrall says in the last paragraph of his book, "All of reference including both simple and reflexive pronouns must be described under one rule, that divided viewpoint is a condition underlying many types of syntactic phenomena" (Ibid., 175-176). It should also be noted that Kuno (1987) made much the same point more recently and extended it beyond the problem with the choice between simple and reflexive pronouns. I will not develop this point here. Let me just say that there is no way of reconciling Ariel's pragmatic analysis of point of view with the views of Cantrall or Kuno: to have the kind of account which she urges, the choice between several linguistic forms should always be possible, which it is not and point of view should always reduce to the choice of a marker of higher rather than lower accessibility to the hearer, which it does not<sup>13</sup>. By the way, it should be noted that examples such as (8) and (9) are in some ways very much like examples such as (6) and (7) where what is in question is the relative ability of the speaker and/or the hearer to identify the referent. This shows how crucial the notion of mutual manifestness, rather than the very simple notion of accessibility used by Ariel, is to the choice of referring expression, as well as the importance of the fact that they are referring: of what importance would the question of who actually

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<sup>12</sup> In some contexts, (9b) seems to be acceptable. However, it does not seem to be a general possibility.

<sup>13</sup> In fact, it should be noted that point of view is very much a matter of what information is given (that is, information accessible only to the subject of consciousness), and the form this information, and most notably, information conveyed using referring expressions, takes (i.e. point of view is using the noun phrases most accessible to the subject of consciousness, given the referent). On this point, see Banfield 1982, Castañeda 1979, and Reboul 1992.



(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.

makes the identification be if all referring expressions were used in a more or less anaphoric way and if “direct” reference was a naïve myth?

## 8. What is accessibility, according to Ariel

Let us go back to Ariel’s notion of accessibility and let us examine the criteria she uses in constructing her Accessibility scale and the justification she gives for the universality of her Accessibility scale. She uses seven criteria in her book, which, however, are the responses to two quite different endeavours:

- (i) trying to determine, or describe, the degree of accessibility encoded by such and such a type of referring expression;
- (ii) trying to explain the relation between this or that type of referring expression and this or that degree of accessibility.

I will call the criteria answering the first attempt *descriptive* and the criteria or principles answering to the second preoccupation *explicative*. The descriptive criteria are the following: distance, competition, saliency, unity; the explicative criteria or principles are: informativity, rigidity, attenuation. It should be noted that the descriptive criteria are rather redundant, unity depending on distance and saliency depending both on distance and unity. Apart from saliency, they also are strongly dependent on a discourse analysis perspective, as what distance measures is the occurrence of the referring expression and its antecedent in the same sentence/ two sentences in a sequence/ the same paragraph/etc. In other words, it is an anaphoric account of referring expressions. We will concentrate here on the descriptive criteria and what they indicate of the notion of accessibility actually used by Ariel.

Ariel says at different points in her book that the notion of accessibility should be based on the Relevance-theoretic notion of mutual manifestness<sup>14</sup> and that it should somehow include point of

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<sup>14</sup> I take it that this notion is not in any need of definition. Just in case, this is what Sperber and Wilson say of mutual manifestness: “Any shared cognitive environment in which it is manifest which people share it is what we call a *mutual cognitive environment*. In a mutual cognitive environment, for every manifest assumption, the fact that it is manifest to the people who share this environment is itself manifest” (Sperber & Wilson 1986,41-42 ), and “A fact is

(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.

view. In fact, as we have just seen, Ariel accounts for point of view in a derived and unsatisfying way. What is certain, however, is that Ariel's notion of accessibility is not really related to mutual manifestness. This is obvious when one looks at her corpus (only constituted from press papers or from short stories) and at her statistical tables: she measured what she could measure in an objective way, that is, distance. I am not saying that this is not an objective way to proceed: what I am questioning, rather is what it is that is measured in such a case. Whatever it is, I do not think that it is mutual manifestness: for one thing, in each of her texts, there is only one speaker, or rather writer. For another, her texts seem to be very uniform, being all drawn from newspapers or short fiction. It is not self-evident that she would have got the same results if she had taken another type of corpus (e.g. transcripts of conversations). And, last but not least, relying as she does on the one criterion of distance, she does not take into account the non-trivial fact that referring expressions, even when they are used in an anaphoric way, may refer. In other words, what is lacking in Ariel's account of referring expressions is... reference. What is worse, though I think that one can account for Ariel's Accessibility scale on the basis of the semantic content of referring expressions plus Relevance Theory, it is impossible to account for the referring ability of referring expressions on the basis of Ariel's Accessibility scale even when it is augmented by Relevance theory.

## 9. What came first? Referring ability or accessibility?

So far I have argued for three things:

- (i) accessibility is not linguistically marked by referring expressions;
- (ii) the notion of accessibility actually used by Ariel is absurdly simple and monolithic in view of the complexities involved in the use and choice of referring expressions: it should at the very least integrate the notion of mutual manifestness and of point of view, but it is rather hard to see how one could construct the notion of accessibility in such a way;

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*manifest* to an individual at a given time if and only if he is capable at that time of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true" (Ibid., 39).

(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.

- (iii) the fact that referring expressions do indeed very often refer cannot be ignored.

In this paragraph, I will try to show that it is specifically their ability to refer which can explain the Accessibility scale of referring expressions, rather than the reverse. In other words, I will try to show something which should be obvious: there is no reason to consider the anaphoric use of referring expressions as in any way primary or preferential to their referential use.

Thus, in the end, the question seems to be whether accessibility came first and referring ability derived from accessibility or whether referring ability came first and accessibility can be derived from referring ability. In other words, can we derive the accessibility scale from the semantic content and referring ability of referring expressions rather than deriving the semantic content and referring ability of referring expressions from the accessibility scale? I will not, for reasons of space, consider the whole of the accessibility scale for all referring expressions: I will rather concentrate on one detail of the accessibility scale, taking one of those which, according to Ariel, better justify her hypothesis of the linguistic marking of accessibility. Let us go back to distal and proximal demonstratives. The accessibility scale predicts, accurately, that distal demonstratives indicate a lower accessibility than do proximal demonstratives. This is certainly borne out by the examples<sup>15</sup>,

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<sup>15</sup> What, however, is not borne out by the examples, is the fact that pronouns encode higher accessibility than do either distal or proximal demonstratives, especially if the demonstratives concerned are demonstrative noun phrases. Let us take a look at example (3) again.

- (3) a. A plane crashed yesterday in New York. This plane used to fly between Miami and New York.  
 b. A plane crashed yesterday in New York. ?That plane used to fly between Miami and New York.  
 c. A plane crashed yesterday in New York. It used to fly between Miami and New York.

Here, the pronoun and the proximal demonstrative noun phrase (and the definite description, by the way) are equally possible, which is not easy to explain on the basis of the accessibility scale, as Keiber rightly remarked on the basis of these examples (see

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though, as we have seen before, it certainly does not imply or show that accessibility, whatever it is, is linguistically marked. If we also take into account the fact, owned by Ariel herself, that the distal demonstrative is often used when the speaker but not the hearer can identify the referent<sup>16</sup> (i.e. the referent is accessible to the speaker but not to the hearer) it is hard, contrary to what Ariel says, to see how this fact should be explained on the basis of Accessibility theory. In such a case, indeed, it is not a lower degree of accessibility for the hearer that is indicated, but a null degree of accessibility, and it should be marked by a much lower marker of accessibility than a distal demonstrative pronoun. Thus, far from Accessibility Theory being justified by this sort of case, it raises a further difficulty.

As I said before, this case is very similar to some uses of indefinite descriptions, where the speaker can identify the referent, but where it is not clear that the hearer can. Now, indefinite descriptions are said to be non-referring, which means neither that there is no reference nor that the speaker cannot identify the reference. Rather, it means simply<sup>17</sup> that identifying the reference is not necessary in order to understand the utterance. In other words, what is indicated by the use of indefinite descriptions, among other things, is the fact that the propositional form of the sentence does not have to include the reference of the indefinite descriptions<sup>18</sup>. Coming back to distal demonstratives,

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Kleiber 1990). Note that it neither can be explained by an appeal to the violation of the scale of accessibility and a consecutive effect of point of view: there does not seem to be any difference in point of view between (a) and (c) (anymore than with the definite description, by the way).

<sup>16</sup> Note that there is no question here of whether it is an anaphoric use of demonstratives: if it were an anaphoric use, there would not be any way for the hearer to be unable to identify the antecedent.

<sup>17</sup> As pointed out by François Recanati, see Recanati 1993.

<sup>18</sup> Just the reverse happens for truly referential expressions, such as proper nouns, which indicate that the propositional form of the utterance should include the reference of the proper noun. In a way, it could be said that such referring expressions as proper nouns on the one hand and indefinite descriptions on the other hand do contribute to the relevance of the utterance, by directing the process of interpretation through a linguistic marking of the requirements that the propositional form of the utterance should meet.

(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.

they certainly are not non-referential expressions, i.e. they do not linguistically indicate that the propositional form of the utterance does not have to include the reference of the distal demonstrative, but they are, like all referring expressions in use, chosen partly on the basis of what the speaker sees as mutually manifest to himself and his hearer. Thus the distal demonstrative, used when the proximal demonstrative would rather be expected, indicates that the point of view chosen is that of the hearer, that the referent is not identifiable by the hearer and that it should not be included in the propositional form of the utterance. This derives from the semantic content of both distal and proximal demonstratives and so, incidentally, does their relative places in Ariel's scale of accessibility.

To see that this is so, let us take a look at first and second person pronouns in reported speech. As Kaplan (1977) has conclusively shown, the semantic content of indexicals is not truth-conditional and descriptive, but non-truth-conditional and non-computational. To identify the referent of *I* in a case of reported speech such as (10), the hearer applies the procedure that he would apply in non reported speech, but applies it relative to the information that has been given, that is, not to the speaker of the whole utterance, but to the speaker of the reported utterance:

(10) Sam said: "I am exhausted".

Something very similar takes place with the anaphoric use of distal and proximal demonstratives: the same procedure which is applied in determining the reference of the demonstrative in its demonstrative (and referring) use, is applied not to space but to the text where the demonstrative occurs. Thus, the anaphoric use of demonstratives and the different positions of distal and proximal demonstratives on the accessibility scale derive from the semantic content of demonstratives and hence from their referring ability, rather than the reverse.

On this view, the question of what came first, accessibility or referring ability, is not tantamount to the question of the chicken and the egg: referring ability came first and accessibility is just a result of referring ability to be explained on the basis of semantic content and Relevance Theory. If this is the case, not only is it not necessary to adopt the theory of the linguistic marking of accessibility, but to do so would also violate Grice's modified principle of Occam's razor: according to this principle, one should

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not multiply senses beyond necessity. If accessibility were linguistically marked, it would be part of the semantic content of the referring expressions, and, as accessibility can be explained without assuming that it is linguistically marked, such a hypothesis should not be accepted.

## 10. Conclusion

Briefly, I have tried to show that Accessibility theory fails on several counts:

- (i) not only does Ariel not show that accessibility is linguistically marked, but it can be shown that such a hypothesis is not compatible with Grice's modified principle of Occam's razor;
- (ii) the notion of accessibility is monolithic and, as such, fails to account for the complexity involved in the choice of referring expressions.

A few words, to conclude, on Accessibility Theory and coherence. A few years ago, Blass (see Blass 1985) showed that coherence was not an explanatory concept accounting for textual phenomena, but rather that such textual phenomena, which may be called *coherent*, are better accounted for in a relevance-theoretic framework. On this view, which I share, coherence is, at the most, an *emergent* property of texts. I think that Ariel's Accessibility theory of referring expressions is a misguided attempt to reintroduce (as far as referring expressions are concerned) coherence (to which accessibility bears a very close similarity) as an explanatory concept. I hope to have shown conclusively here that such a reintroduction does not work and is not necessary.

Finally, I want to plead for a referential account of referring expressions: to my mind, wholly ignoring the referring ability of referring expressions when one tries to account for them is tantamount to trying to explain how a musical instrument works, while discounting the fact that it is used to produce sounds (and not just any old sounds) and that it was built for precisely this purpose.

(1997), in Connolly, J.H. et al. (eds) : *Discourse and pragmatics in functional grammar*, Berlin/NY, de Gruyter, 91-108.

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