

I'd like to discuss a very obvious instance where our Binding Theory appears to fail quite miserably. Consider the following sentence:

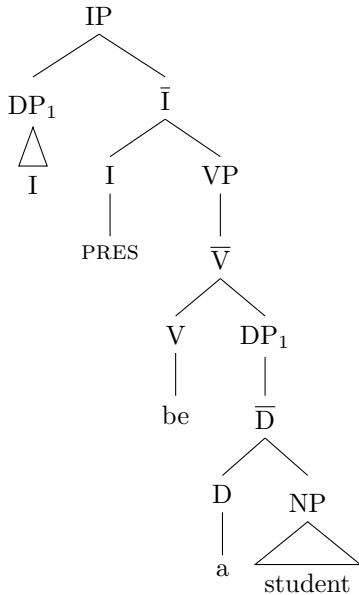
(a) I am a student.

The intuitive index assignment for this sentence is:

(a') I_1 am a student $_1$.

I believe that this is the intuitive index assignment because the sentence is literally saying that 'I' and 'a student' refer to the same entity. I am 'I,' and also, I am 'a student.'

Here is the parse for the sentence (a'):



Here we can see the Principal C, which says that r-expressions must not be bound, is violated. The pronoun 'I' binds the r-expression 'a student' because they are co-indexed and 'I' c-commands 'a student.'

But this is clearly a grammatical sentence. One solution to this problem would be to define a special case for the verb 'to be,' since it is essentially an assignment operator when the object is a DP. However, this may not be as thorough a solution as we would like. For example, what about sentences like:

(b) I_1 look like a student $_1$.

(c) He_1 seems to be the teacher $_1$.

Are we to include verbs like 'look like' and 'seem (to be)' in our exception as well? Are there other verbs we are forgetting? Do these extras *really* behave like 'to be'?

I think it is clear that a different solution is needed, not least for the reason that the index assignment in sentence (b) above should seem distinctly odd.

Earlier we said that (a') is clearly grammatical. But is it? I propose that it is, in fact, not. To make this clearer, let us examine the following discourse:

Frederick Hello my good chap, and how are you on this finest of evenings?
 George Reckon I'm a'right, an you'self?
 Frederick Quite well, quite well. I wonder, is the owner of this most excellent establishment about?
 George I'm the owner, sure 'nough.

Let's take a look at George's last sentence. Assuming he is telling the truth, the following index assignment ought to be the correct one (based on our assumptions up until now):

(d) I_1 'm the owner $_1$.

This is a similar sentence to ‘I am a student.’ I think we can agree that at least in metaphysical, reality-based terms, ‘I’ and ‘the owner’ refer to the same person.

But that is not actually what we mean we talk about reference. A DP does not refer to an actual object in the external world – it refers to someone’s internal, mental representation of that object. In this case, Frederick’s mental representations of George and of the owner are separate, *up until* George informs him that they are, in fact, the same person.

In Frederick’s head, George exists as a man, probably behind a counter of some kind, with a face that looks like whatever George looks like, and an accent, and probably a beard (at least, that’s how I imagine him.) The owner exists as a faceless concept, with the main property of owning the store, and also the property of being a person. It is thus completely conceivable that these two concepts can exist separately, until Frederick discovers that George is, in fact, the person who owns the store, and that the person who owns the store is, in fact, George.

Thus, the *actually* correct index assignment for (d) is:

(d’) I_1 am the owner₂.

Here, Principal C is satisfied, because the r-expression ‘the owner’ is not bound by anything.

It was easy to see the separation of mental representations in the above example. What about in a sentence like (a), ‘I am a student’? It’s a bit trickier, but I think the same reasoning applies. ‘I’ is, well, me, and ‘a student’ is an abstract thing, having the properties of going to a school, studying, drinking unhealthy amounts of caffeine, etc. They are separate mental representations, and what I am really saying in a sentence like ‘I am a student’ is that ‘me’ is an example or instantiation of ‘a student’; that I share have the properties that make a person a student.

This becomes slightly more complicated in something like

(e) I_1 am the teacher₁.

Perhaps we can apply similar reasoning as we did in the discourse between Frederick and George; for example, if the Syntax 401 class is sitting in the classroom on the first day of class and a man walks in and says “I am the teacher!” We are likely to believe him because he is wearing a suit, but up until that moment we could have been unsure as to whether he is, in fact, the person teaching the class.

But what about later in the semester, after we are all familiar with the teacher of the class, and there is no longer a question as to who this is? Perhaps wishing to remind us of his authority, he proclaims “*I* am the teacher!” We all already know that the person speaking and the teacher are the same. How can these be two separate mental representations?

I maintain that they are still separate. In sentences like this, even if we know pragmatically that the two DPs refer to the same person or entity, we can still conceive of them as separate things. That is to say, ‘I’ is Kyle the person, and ‘the teacher’ is a role being filled by Kyle. Just because we all know that that role is being filled by Kyle, or ‘I’, does not mean that they are not separate mental representations.

In conclusion, adding mental representations to our definition of DP reference allows us to deal with situations in our Binding Theory that appear to violate Principal C.