Null Complement Anaphora: Why syntax matters

Unlike other forms of null anaphora (e.g. ellipsis, sluicing, gapping), Null Complement Anaphora (NCA) has received relatively little attention in modern syntactic theory. Yet as a common phenomenon in English and cross-linguistically and the only known candidate for being a null deep anaphor, NCA deserves closer examination. I propose a syntactic account of NCA that improves upon existing proposals, and I suggest that NCA's deep anaphor status belies its importance for syntactic and semantic theory.

In classifying NCA as deep anaphora, Hankamer and Sag (1976) demonstrate that the site of NCA (underlined in (1.)) has no internal syntax.

(1) I asked Tracy to bring the horses into the barn but she refused ___ .
(NCA = *to bring the horses into the barn*)

Depiante (2000) supports this deep anaphora diagnosis and proposes that NCA consists of a free variable that can be of the semantic types <s, <e,t>> (property), <s,t> (proposition), or <<s,t>, t> (question), but **cannot** be of type e (individual). However, examination of a larger set of NCA-selecting predicates suggests that NCA **can** in fact be interpreted as an individual (type e), casting doubt on the semantic account of NCA.

The key observation is that PPs which are comprised of a semantically vacuous preposition and an individual-denoting DP can be replaced by NCA, resulting in NCA with a type e interpretation (ex. 2).

(2) The board considered the new proposal but half of the members objected ___ .
(NCA = *to the new proposal*)

In light of this data I analyze NCA as a free variable that can be of the syntactic category CP, VP, or PP, but crucially not DP. Its semantic interpretation is determined by its antecedent and the predicate that selects it. This syntactic analysis better accounts for the distribution of the null anaphor and correctly predicts its range of semantic interpretation.

To support the non-DP analysis of NCA, I demonstrate i) that NCA cannot occur as the complement of predicates that select only DP complements:

(3) * Jill kicked Robyn and Andrew also kicked ___.
(Intended NCA = *Robyn*)

ii) that NCA replaces only non-DP constituents while *it* replaces only DPs:

(4) The doctor prescribed the experimental treatment and I consented (*to) ___.

(5) The docter prescribed the experimental treatment and I consented * (to) **it**.

and iii) that the selection of NCA and *it* by different sets of predicates is due to a difference in syntactic category: *it* is a DP, NCA is not.

Not only does this syntactic account correctly predict the behavior of NCA, it also suggests that syntax — and not just semantics — is important for the licensing and interpretation of deep anaphors. In the process of exploring NCA new light is shed on existing questions in syntax (through the interaction of NCA with ditransitives) and semantics (providing a counterexample to Landman's (2006) claim that all variables are of type e).