

Antecedent and Anaphor

An antecedent is a linguistic expression which provides the interpretation for a second expression (anaphor) which has little meaning of its own. An antecedent is usually a noun phrase. In the examples given below, the first bold item is the antecedent and the second is the anaphor referring to it.

If you see Alice, give her my love. (Antecedent – Alice; anaphor – her)

She ran into her room. (Antecedent – She; anaphor – her)

John injured himself playing cricket. (Antecedent – John; anaphor – himself)

An antecedent usually comes before its anaphor. Occasionally it follows its anaphor.

If you see her, give Alice my love.

An anaphor that precedes its antecedent is sometimes called a cataphor.

It is possible for the antecedent and its anaphor to be in different sentences.

Alice is my sister. She is an architect. (Antecedent – Alice; anaphor – she)

It is possible for an antecedent to be a verb phrase, an adjective phrase or a prepositional phrase.

She asked me to post the letter and I did it. (Here the antecedent is the verb phrase – post the letter)

I thought she was in the room, but I didn't find her there. (Here the antecedent is the prepositional phrase – in the room)

The antecedent can also be a complete sentence.

Alice: John is getting married.

Peter: Who told you that?

Here the anaphor that refers to the entire sentence '*John is getting married*'.