Routledge Studies in Applied Linguistics

REFERRING IN A SECOND LANGUAGE

STUDIES ON REFERENCE TO PERSON IN A MULTILINGUAL WORLD

Edited by
Jonathon Ryan and Peter Crosthwaite

ROUTLEDGE

Referring in a Second Language

The introduction and tracking of reference to people or individuals, known as referential movement, is a central feature of coherence, and accounts for "about every third word of discourse". Located at the intersection of pragmatics and grammar, reference is now proving a rich and enduring source of insight into second language development. The challenge for second language (L2) learners involves navigating the selection and positioning of reference in the target language, continually shifting and balancing the referential means used to maintain coherence, while remaining acutely sensitive to the discourse and social context.

The present volume focuses on how L2 learners meet that challenge, bringing together both eminent and up-and-coming researchers in the field of L2 acquisition. The chapters address a range of problems in second language acquisition (SLA) (e.g., form-function mapping, first language [L1] influence, developmental trajectories), and do so in relation to various theoretical approaches to reference (e.g., Accessibility Theory, Givenness Hierarchy). The global outlook of these studies relates to the L2 acquisition of English, French, Japanese, Korean, and Spanish and covers a diverse range of situational contexts including heritage language learning, English as a medium of instruction, and the development of sociolinguistic competence.

Jonathon Ryan is a principal academic staff member at Wintec in Hamilton, New Zealand, with the Centre for Languages and the Master of Applied Innovation programme. He is also Head of Materials Development for Chasing Time English. His research interests include reference, practitioner research, L2 pragmatics, and Conversation Analysis for language teaching.

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Contents

Figures

Tables

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Foreword

Occasionally I get asked as a linguist: “What is it really that you study?” And when I answer that I study language, I may then be asked: “And what’s so fascinating about language that you have been studying it all your life, and still don’t seem to be finished with it?” And I have found myself pondering over that question in some depth many times during my career. In my view, language is one of the most fantastic tools that humanity has been given. From the individual words that allow us to name objects and events, to the full sentential structures that allow us to ask, direct, query, express ideas and emotions, and many more things. Language makes it possible for us to communicate. And if we can do more with language than just thread a few words together, it allows us to tell our story: our personal story, the story of our families, our cultures, or even our histories.

In order to thread words together in a coherent fashion, and hence communicate, one needs more than just nouns and verbs to label objects and events. One needs linguistic elements that indicate to the listener or reader how the words and how the sentential structures link together. And to make our communication not just coherent but also cohesive, one needs to know how to use language in such a way that there is never any doubt about who, what, or where one is referring to. For this purpose, we use reference.

How does reference work? Nouns may be embedded in noun phrases that have determiners that indicate what is new or given information, reference to objects and protagonists may be maintained by other, lighter forms such as pronouns, or zero anaphora, and verbs may carry information about the time in which the event took place, or if it is an important event in the story or rather one that happened in the background. In other words, all the linguistic means available to us have multiple functions: a purely referential function, where the object of the reference is in the external reality that we are speaking of, but also a discourse referential function through which expressions in one’s discourse, text, or narrative are linked. The fact that language has these multiple functions makes it an infinitely more subtle and versatile tool than if one could just name things with it.

It seems obvious that learning a form that has multiple functions might be harder than learning forms that only have one. And possibly, this might lead to a learner picking up such functions one after another, possibly taking some time to acquire the further functions once a first function is acquired. And indeed, we seem to find this in child first language acquisition: Children very early on can use nouns and (somewhat later) verbs to describe, or label objects and events, as in: “Look! A duck!” However, careful studies of children’s narrative discourse as conducted by Bamberg (1987), Karmiloff-Smith (1979), and Hickmann (2003) show that the text-internal cohesive functions of these linguistic means are acquired relatively late in the child’s acquisition process. For example, Hickmann (2003) shows that children only acquire the appropriate use of referential expressions in narratives around the age of seven, whereas children can label items before they are three years old. In other words, children seem to acquire the linguistic means for reference one function at the time.

It has been argued that one of the reasons for this slower development is that children have to learn to understand what the function actually beholds. What does it mean when a form can indicate if something is “new” or “given” information in one’s discourse? What does it mean when a form indicates that an event is part of the foreground or the background of the narrative or text? Indeed, quite intricate knowledge is required to use these markers appropriately. First of all, for the given-new distinction, the child has to understand that listeners and speakers may not share all the knowledge the speaker has, and that they may bring different perspectives to the exchange of information. Second, they have to come to an understanding that these forms that they have happily been using in order to refer to objects and events outside of the text can also be used to message to the listener that information is thought to be shared (or not), that some events are more or less important, temporally linked or not, etc., and, thirdly, they have to come to grips with the fine details of which forms do what exactly. In other words, they have to have acquired some level of theory of mind, a large scale of different forms, as well as a fine-grained understanding of the multiple functions of each of the forms.

In the past, it was thought (partly based on Piaget’s work and his assumption of ego-centrism) that the child might take a long time to understand that their interlocutor might not share the same information they have access to. However, in more recent times, Tomasello and colleagues, and also Baillargeon and colleagues (amongst others) have amply shown that this is not the case, and that even the very young child very quickly has some understanding of the intentions and wishes of the individuals around them. The explanation for why these linguistic means are acquired late, therefore, has to lie in the fact that the child is confronted with linguistic forms that have multiple functions, some of which are more obvious to acquire, whereas others are more opaque and more in flux.

Imagine then a learner who already knows that language is multifunctional, that language allows the speaker to indicate to the hearer what information they already share or what information might be new to them, and who already knows that some forms are likely being used for these purposes. In other words, imagine an adult acquiring a new language. Interestingly, at the time I started looking into referential expressions in L2 learners, little had been written on the topic in this area. But logically, adults should bring a huge advantage to the task of language learning: they already know a lot about language, including the fact that language is multifunctional. One could therefore argue that they should have an easier task acquiring referential systems in a new language. This was indeed the assumption I made myself when I started to compare child first and adult second language acquisition of referential means.

But of course, the problem for the adult second language learner is not as self-evident as suggested here: as they already know another language, they will have potentially acquired very different linguistic forms for these functions, or the use of deceptively similar forms for slightly different functions. For example, where English provides its speakers with nouns, pronouns, and zero anaphors, the latter form is relatively infrequent and restricted to specific syntactic (as well as semantic) contexts of use. In Chinese, a similar range of forms is available (for the differences between the Chinese and English forms, see Hickmann and Hendriks, 1999), but the zero anaphor is used in very high frequency, and almost considered the default form once shared knowledge of the entity or protagonist has been established. At the same time, however, all languages seem to show a similar progression of fuller (noun + determiner or article) to lighter (pronoun or zero anaphor) forms along a scale which negatively correlates with how familiar the intended referent is to the hearer/in the discourse. In other words, the adult should be familiar with the principle, but will, of course, have to establish what forms are available, and how they are distributed across the scale.

Findings when looking at the comparison were interesting: Adults showed clear knowledge of the fact that (a lack of) shared knowledge can be marked linguistically (they marked new information relatively consistently, regardless of the forms needed to do so), but did not seem to mark different levels of given information equally clearly or systematically. In particular, when maintaining reference, adult learners seem to use over-explicit forms, i.e., nouns instead of pronouns, pronouns instead of zero anaphors. I have called this "a seeming contradiction" in earlier works (Hendriks, 2003). Similar findings have been found by many others also looking at adult L2 acquisition of referential marking in discourse. And various explanations have been offered: I personally proposed that it might be because adults understand the importance of shared knowledge so well that they try and avoid any ambiguous reference, leading them to use full noun phrases in cases of potential ambiguity because of gender or case markings (i.e., if one does not know if a cat is feminine or masculine in the target language, using the pronouns he versus she (which indicate that the information is given) might actually be more confusing than simply using a noun "the cat" (which may be confusing in terms of it being new or given information but is absolutely clear in terms of the designated referent). Hence a "seeming" contradiction only. Others, such as von Stutterheim have suggested that the problem lies with the fact that when producing spoken discourse, there might be a cognitive overload, such that learners, who will be trying to get the message right at the utterance level, might lose oversight of the structure of the full discourse, and hence marking of cohesion. Finally, yet other explanations have offered specific typological differences and a higher likelihood of over-explicitness in some languages than in others (i.e., languages with multiple genders and case might be more prone to over-explicit markings than those that do not have gender and case). Note that most of these data are production data, all involving mostly some type of narration or description of static pictures, picture sequences, or movies.

In other words, although some interesting and relatively similar findings have been reported across a small variety of tasks, and plausible explanations have been suggested, we need more studies on a larger variety of source and target languages, more diversified populations, and probably we also need more varied elicitation techniques. This book promises to do all of the above across a range of new studies, and is, therefore, a very welcome addition to the literature, promising to shed some further and much needed light on the issues surrounding reference as acquired and used by (adult) L2 learners.

Henriette Hendriks, University of Cambridge

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Abbreviations

Ø	zero
AT	Accessibility Theory
BV	Basic Variety
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
CLI	cross-linguistic influence
det.	determiner
EFL	English as a foreign language
ESF	European Science Foundation
ESL	English as a second language
FA	Functional Approach
FL	foreign language
GH	Givenness Hierarchy
HAM	high accessibility marker
HL	heritage language
HLS	heritage language speakers
L1	first language
L2	second language
L3	third or subsequent language
LAM	low accessibility marker
Lit	literal
MAM	medium accessibility marker
N	noun
NNS	non-native speaker
NP	noun phrase
NS	native speaker
PPVH	Pragmatic Principles Violation Hypothesis
RE	referring expression
SL	source language
SLA	second language acquisition
SVO	subject–verb–object
TLU	target-like use
VP	verb phrase
V–O	verb–object
V–S	verb–subject

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1 Referring in a second language

Introduction to the volume

Peter Crosthwaite and Jonathon Ryan

During the production of any discourse, one must use language to *refer* to people, places, objects or ideas under discussion. While there are few genuine typological universals that hold across all languages, the ability to introduce and maintain *reference* is a feature common to every language, and, as with the ability to discuss concepts such as space, causation and time, reference is a feature relevant to the coherence of any discourse produced, resolving the central question of "who did what (to whom)?".

While, for reasons of space, we must necessarily eschew discussion of the various conceptual definitions of reference in the literature (e.g. Frege, 1892), in this volume we define reference as realised in the use of *referring expressions*, including zero, pronominal and nominal forms, to refer to entities under discussion. These expressions are then organised through such means as *information structure*, *substitution* and *word order*. The appropriate selection, position and marking of these referring expressions allow speakers and listeners (and writers/readers) to know when *new* information is being introduced into discourse, and when continued reference to *old* information is updated. This process of referential "movement" affects "about every third word of discourse (sometimes even more than that)" (Kibrik, 2001, p. 1124). Moreover, the complexity involved in managing reference across extended discourse and multiple referential targets is astounding, and in the face of such complexity, "the fact that people actually manage to understand one another most of the time *seems almost magical*" (Fretheim & Gundel, 1996, p. 7). Yet, the ability to introduce and maintain reference is one that is acquired by most children from a very young age (Serratrice & Allen, 2015).

The focus of the present volume is on how second language (L2) learners refer in their target language. Despite the apparent ease with which children acquire the ability to produce and maintain coherent reference in their first language as noted previously, research into second language acquisition has repeatedly shown that L2 learners struggle to acquire the means to make consistently accurate and felicitous reference in the target language. Rather, they are prone to producing reference that is ambiguous, erroneous, under-informative or overexplicit (or all of these), with serious implications for the coherence of any discourse that L2 learners are attempting to produce.

As pointed out by Hendriks in the foreword, while studies on L2 reference have revealed a range of findings explaining the difficulties involved in producing coherent reference in the L2, the time is now right to expand upon previous findings through new methodological advances, data from previously underexplored L1/L2 pairs and alternative theories of L2 reference acquisition and use. In the rest of this introduction, we explore how L1 reference has been characterised in the (applied) linguistics literature, before providing a brief overview of previous L2 treatments of reference in the field. We then discuss in more detail the need for this volume before introducing the individual contributions.

Approaches to L1 reference

There have been various treatments of reference in the (applied) linguistics literature over the past 40 years, each of which has sought to account for the conditions governing the speakers' (or writers') selection and positioning of referring expressions. Given considerations for space, we cannot hope to account for all of these, but have attempted to select treatments from those existing in only one domain (e.g. syntax) to those that take a more integrated (e.g. discourse-pragmatic) account of this phenomenon.

One of the most influential early syntactic treatments of reference is Chomsky's (1981/1993) government and binding theory, developed to account for the positioning and coreference of pronouns to their antecedents (i.e. John saw his mother), although the syntactic binding component of this theory was modified in the later Minimalist approach to include semantic and phonological elements (Lasnik & Lohndal, 2010). Similarly, early typological accounts of coreference have focused on relative clause formation, such as the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (Keenan & Comrie, 1977). These approaches took the view that there were *universal* grammatical principles dictating the conditions for reference in natural languages. However, there has been a great wealth of research in linguistics to challenge this view (which we do not attempt to cover here), and, ultimately, these theories did not seek to address reference as performed across greater units than the sentence.

Early functional treatments went beyond the sentence level to categorise reference as an underlying semantic property of the complete text, under the notions of *cohesion* and *coherence* (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Hasan, 1984). Halliday and Hasan suggested that the cohesion of a given discourse text was formed through the presence of cohesive "ties" between presupposed referential, spatial, temporal or causal elements. These included a general notion of "reference" in the form of antecedent-anaphor relations (e.g. definite articles and demonstrative noun phrases (NPs)), alongside "substitution" (including pronouns and ellipsis). Hasan (1984) claimed that the coherence of a text could then be determined by the frequency of the cohesive "ties" within it, although this theory was subsequently determined to be overly superficial and did not hold up to empirical scrutiny (Carrell, 1982).

More recent accounts of reference have (quite rightfully) determined that reference cannot be placed within the sole domain of syntax or semantics, but that reference is subject to a range of conditions and constraints at the intersection of syntax, semantic, pragmatic and discourse interfaces. Reference cannot be treated simply a feature of the text, but is now thought of as (minimally) a two-way exchange between speaker/hearer (or writer/reader) realised in the "common ground" (following Chafe, 1974; see also Clark, 2015), with reference to entities within a given discourse held in "in two collaborating minds" (Gernsbacher & Givon, 1995, p. viii) in real time, as shown in examples (1) and (2) below:

(1) A: I just got back from Paris last week.
    B: That must have been an interesting trip.
(2) A: Did you talk to Kate yesterday?
    B: Yes, I told her about the arrangements

(Clark, 2015, p. 330).

The speakers' (or writers') specific use of a shorter NP such as the demonstrative pronoun (1) or personal pronoun (2) at that particular moment (rather than the use of a fuller NP form) is designed to allow the listener (or reader) to resolve the reference with as minimal effort and maximal efficiency as possible (Hawkins, 2004). Under such accounts, either an *incorrect* (i.e. an error at the syntax/semantics level) or – for the first time – an *infelicitous* NP (at the pragmatics/discourse level) are both likely to result in the listeners/readers' inability to appropriately resolve the reference, potentially leading to miscommunication with an accompanying breakdown of overall coherence (Ryan, 2012).

Once researchers had realised the central importance of pragmatics and discourse to the realisation of reference, a range of syntax-pragmatic scales/hierarchies of referring expressions were then proposed in the literature to account for the felicitous selection of referential NP forms according to particular discourse-pragmatic contexts. A particularly influential account under this paradigm is that of Gundel, Hedberg, and Zacharski's (1993) *Givenness Hierarchy*, where the speakers'/writers' selection of referring expressions depends on the relative "cognitive status" of the referential target, depending on their relative "givenness" in the discourse as it unfolds (a more detailed account of this framework is provided in **Jennifer Killam's** chapter within this volume). An alternative account is that of Givon's (1995) *Topicality Scale*, where the selection of referring expressions signals the "topicality" of a referent according to its level of "activation," as calculated by such measures as the relative distance between references to said referent. In other words, zero or anaphoric pronouns may be used for "continued [coreferential] activation," while indefinite nouns, demonstrative NPs, definite NPs (including relative clause modifiers), L-dislocation and grammatical role/voice change are used for "discontinued [non-coreferential] activation," with these forms listed in order of their relative level of activation. While not without their flaws, the strength of these accounts was their ability to account for reference beyond the sentence level and to account for variation in referential forms used according to contextual/discourse-related factors shared between both speaker and listener (or reader/writer) during production.

Probably the most influential account of reference along discourse/pragmatic lines is that of Ariel's (1991, 2008, 2010) Accessibility Theory (AT), which is used in **Jonathon Ryan's**; **Jo Lumley's**; **Peter Crosthwaite** and **Min Jung Jee's**; and **Ewa Lenart's** chapters in this volume. Ariel's scale of referring expressions as organised according to the relative level of "accessibility" they denote are shown in this Accessibility Scale (Ariel, 2008, p. 44):

> *Full name* > *long definite description* > *short definite description* > *last name* > *first name* > *distal demonstrative* > *proximate demonstrative* > *stressed pronoun* > *unstressed pronoun* > *cliticised pronoun* > *verbal person inflections* > *zero*

According to Ariel, referring expressions are used to "encode" (Ariel, 2008) the level of inference required to resolve any reference at a given moment, taking into consideration the target referent(s)' relative distance between discourse-old and repeated mentions, competition between referents of similar types, degree of salience of the referent, and the unity (breaks in continuity) of reference within a given discourse sequence. Interestingly, in a way, Ariel's hierarchy of referring expressions hearkens back to the universalist position taken by Chomsky et al. in that the configuration of forms along the hierarchy is believed to hold cross-linguistically.

Most recently, corpus-based and computational accounts of reference (mostly in the form of algorithms for coreference resolution) have become increasingly prominent, given the potential benefits of successful coreference resolution for machine translation and automated essay scoring, among other applications. While computational linguistics-based accounts of reference lie outside the scope of this volume, the history of these accounts has also followed a trajectory from mainly syntax-led approaches to those incorporating semantic and discourse information as key components of successful coreference resolution across a variety of languages (e.g. Poesio, Stevenson, Eugenio, & Hitzmann, 2004; Lee, He, Lewis, & Zettlemoyer, 2017).

Approaches to L2 reference

Like L1 reference, work on L2 reference has been conducted within the domains of syntax, semantics, discourse-pragmatics and the intersection of each. If we are to take the distinction between these domains at face value, the second language learner will have already internalised the kind of language-universal syntax-semantic-pragmatic tendencies of linguistic form and referential function (e.g. the NP hierarchies such as Ariel's AT) during the course of acquiring their first language. We should also consider that if typological universals [of the type predicted by AT] are universal to natural human languages, "then they should also hold for interlanguages" (Callies, 2009, p. 107). The challenge for L2 learners, therefore, is to first acquire a *new* set of referential forms in the target language, before mapping form to function according to the new syntax-semantic-pragmatic configuration required for coherent production of reference in that target language. They must do all this while avoiding any influence or transfer from their L1 into their L2 production, all during the performance of often cognitively and linguistically complex activities such as narratives or essay writing. Clearly, this is not a simple task, but it is a crucial one that – in our opinion at least – often takes a back seat to form-focused instruction on temporal, causal or spatial language in most L2 teaching and learning contexts (see the **Afterword** for further discussion).

Accounts of L2 reference must therefore consider the relative developmental states of the L2 learner, the typological configurations of L1 source/L2 target languages (and this is not always easy to work out in the case of L3, multilingual or heritage language learners, see **Peter Crosthwaite** and **Min Jung Jee's** chapter for further discussion) and the difficulties involved in both acquiring and managing L2 production at the syntax–semantics–pragmatic interfaces given the limited linguistic and processing means at L2 learners' disposal. One of the earliest influential accounts of L2-specific reference along these lines is sourced in the functional approach as part of Klein and Perdue's (1997) investigation of the "Basic Variety," a characterisation of low proficiency L2 production. This was summarised in Watorek, Benazzo, and Hickmann (2012) as "a simple linguistic organisation that is nonetheless well structured around a set of system-internal principles that are universal in the sense that they are shared by learners of different source and target languages during a certain period of time in the acquisition process" (p. 3). Reference under the Basic Variety (BV) is restricted via a "controller-first" agent-patient semantic constraint on most utterances combined with a "focus-last" pragmatic constraint on information structure, while referential forms themselves lack inflection for number and person or are frequently ambiguous due to the use of zero anaphora where pronominal or full-NPs may be required. Many L2 learners (for a variety of reasons) do not progress beyond the BV, and the coherence of the reference produced by such learners is strongly impacted by these limitations.

Beyond the BV, L2 learners are required to complete more complex linguistic tasks with the limited amount of L2 forms they have acquired, or need to increase their range of L2 forms to more accurately complete familiar tasks. It is at this point in an L2 learners' development where the L1/L2 configuration plays a more prominent role in the task of acquiring and managing L2 reference, and there have been a wealth of studies investigating particular referential forms and functions across different L1/L2 pairs. For example, there has been much work on the acquisition of grammatical articles such as the English indefinite and definite articles across different L1/L2 pairs (e.g. Ekiert, 2010; Crosthwaite, 2014), as well as a number of contrastive studies on L2 zero anaphora production (e.g. Tao & Healey, 2005; Nakahama, 2009), L2 demonstrative use (e.g. Ionin, Baek, Kim, Ko, & Wexler, 2012) as well as transfer of topic/focus information structure into subject/object languages (e.g. Sasaki, 1990; Yuan, 1995).