

REFERENCE FORM AND DISCOURSE PATTERNS

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Abstract

As a part of language use, people need to refer to things, people, and ideas in ways that they know their interlocutors will understand. Speakers must often choose among alternate forms of reference, for example "she", "Terry Gross", or "the interviewer on Fresh Air". This choice is often explained in terms of how people represent the discourse events and entities, where some entities are more actively represented than others. When the speaker can assume that the listener has a highly activated representation of an entity, the speaker can also assume that it will be easier for the listener to re-activate that representation during referent resolution, in comparison with cases where the referent representation is relatively less active. The activation of representations can be influenced by many things, some of which stem from the linguistic context.

I investigate five linguistic factors here: Recency, Subjecthood, Focus, Parallelism, and Goal Status. For each factor, I find evidence of two generalizations. First, referents associated with each of these linguistic factors have a higher probability of being referred to again in the following utterance than comparable referents. Second, referents with those same properties also are more likely to be referred to with pronouns than comparable referents. For each factor I discuss possible explanations for the frequent subsequent reference to certain types of entities, and how this might relate to the speaker's choice of reference form. I also discuss issues relevant to each factor, and provide cross-linguistic evidence for three of them.