

## REFERRING: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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The aim of this paper is to reflect on the social aspects of *referring* to a third person.<sup>1</sup> The starting point of the present discussion is taken from Fillmore (1975) who states that making a reference can be accounted for by the social characteristics of the discourse, namely by "the sorts of social relationships that obtain among the speaker and the addressee and the person referred to" (Fillmore 1975: 80).

The social nature of referring has also been observed by other authors whose primary concern is not sociolinguistics at all. For example, Strawson has pointed out that in order for the speaker to make a unique reference and for the hearer to identify it there must be some context of utterance which comprises "at least, the time, the place, the situation, the identity of the speaker, the subject which forms the immediate focus of interest, and the personal histories of both the speaker and those he is addressing" (Strawson 1971: 188).

To illustrate what he means by reference Lyons (1977) says: "When a sentence like *Napoleon is a Corsican* is uttered to make a statement, we will say that the speaker refers to a certain individual (Napoleon) by means of the referring expression. If the reference is successful, the referring expression will correctly identify the individual in question: the referent" (Lyons 1977: 177). This shows that every *act of reference* comprises the following elements:

1. the referent,
2. the referring expression,
3. the utterance in which the speaker is using the referring expression, and in which the addressee can recognize it (identify the referent).

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The referring expressions ('terms of reference' as Fillmore calls them) can be divided into two groups: pronouns (English *he/she*, Polish *on/ona*) and referential NPs (proper names, titles, common nouns and all kinds of phrases that can be used to refer, e.g., *this woman over there, the fellow with an umbrella*, etc.).

Referring pronouns are relatively few in comparison with referential NPs and their functions are also fairly limited. They are almost exclusively used to refer. However, Zwicky (1977) gives two examples of other uses of the third person pronouns under the heading of 'displaced uses' of pronouns. The equivalents of English *she*, *Sie* and *Lei* in German and Italian respectively are also used to indicate formal address. It is intimate or condescending to say *he* in *Is he angry* "said, with labialization throughout, by wife to husband" (Zwicky 1977: 716). In Polish, there is a corresponding example of the use of the third person pronoun mentioned by Labocha (1981). The function of forms like *Niech (on) już idzie* (in the sense of 'idź już') and *Niech (on) mi poda* (in the sense of 'podaj mi')<sup>2</sup> is a direct command to the hearer (it is necessary that the speaker and the hearer be close acquaintances). One can, for example, hear playful use of this kind of imperative among students.

The other group of referring expressions is very wide and its items can, at least in part, be used as vocatives. However, the correspondence between the use of a given item as a vocative and a referential expression is not a straightforward one. An interesting discussion of these relations in English is provided by Zwicky (1974). He says that "All vocatives with names as parts are also usable as referential NPs" (Zwicky 1974: 788). In most situations, if somebody uses a particular term with proper name in it to address someone, he can use it as a term of reference towards the same person:

- (1) Grandma Myshkin, tell me about Lublin.
- (2) Grandma Myshkin told me a lot about Lublin.

The two exceptions are concerned with the differences of the conditions on the vocative and referential use of first name+last name and last name alone. Compare:

- (3) William Bright, I want you to publish this article.
- (4) William Bright will publish this article.
- (5) Chomsky, you've written a masterful article.
- (6) Chomsky has written a masterful article.

For NPs which do not include proper nouns the relations are even weaker. Some NPs can only be used as vocatives (e.g., *ma'am, love, amigo*) some as

<sup>2</sup> *Niech (on) już idzie* and *Niech (on) mi poda* can be translated into English as 'He should go' and 'He should give me' respectively.

referential NPs (e.g., *physician, pediatrician*), and on some occasions both are possible but "the conditions on their use are different, compare:

- (7) My friend, you gotta buy this car.
- (8) My friend just has to buy this car."<sup>3</sup>

(Zwicky 1974: 789).

Although it has been claimed that systems of reference have been less revealing than kinship or address systems (cf. Hymes 1971) it is difficult to imagine a complete study of deixis, for example, (or 'social deixis' to use Fillmore's term again) without the study of sociolinguistic aspects of referring.

There seem to be two main principles associated with referring: *informativeness* and *appropriateness*. The former aspect has been mentioned by Hudson (1980) on the occasion of discussing norms governing speech. He refers to Grice's (Grice 1975) 'cooperative principle', which includes, among others, the norm 'be informative' when speaking. "One effect of this norm is that one should specify a referent as informatively, that is as precisely, as one can. Thus if I am talking to you, and I want to say that your sister is outside, I should say *your sister* (or use her name if I know it) rather than simply *somebody* or *a girl* or *either your sister or your brother*. If I use any of these less precise expressions, you will be entitled to 'read between the lines' that I don't know any more precisely who the person is, because you know that we are subject to the norm 'be informative' and I would have used a more precise expression if I had been able to" (Hudson 1980: 118).

It seems that the argument for the need of referring being informative is undisputable. At least in most cultures one has to make clear who is being talked about to enable the conversation to proceed. Otherwise it may be disordered. Consider the following example when A and B meet in the street:

- (9) A: I think I'll take a week off.
- B: Do you think he will agree?
- A: Whom do you mean?

If it is not clear for A who is meant by "he" in B's question the communication between them will be impaired. Obviously B had to have somebody in mind as (10) could not be the answer to A's question:

- (1) \*Anyone.

This shows that pronouns have to have a clearly defined antecedent to be used successfully as referring expressions. However, it may be the case that the referent has not been mentioned in the course of the conversation but the extralinguistic context of the conversation will disambiguate the referent.

<sup>3</sup> Examples 1-8 are taken from Zwicky 1974: 788-89.

For example, if a surgeon is asked after an operation

(11) Could you tell me, doctor, how she is?

the addressee may have a full right to understand that he is asked about the state of health of a woman whom he has just operated. Very interestingly, however, the norm 'be informative' may affect the use of a referring expression in (11). If it is a husband making an inquiry he may want to 'inform' the surgeon that he is the patient's spouse and without introducing himself he may say:

(12) Could you tell me, doctor, how my wife is?

If, on the other hand, the surgeon were asked

(13) Could you tell me, doctor, how Mrs. X/the patient/the woman is?

before answering, he might first want to ask for the other person's identity, if the other person was a complete stranger to him, and not, say, one of his hospital superiors.

Another example of the speaker's making his relationship to the referent clear by means of a referring expression, will be provided from Polish. Often, in the case of telephone calls, when the intended addressee is found not present, and the telephone is answered by someone from his family, the caller may hear something like:

(4) Ojca/Męża/Syna/Mamy/Babci (etc.) nie ma w domu.  
(Father/Husband/Son/Mother/Grandmother (etc.) is not at home.)

When the caller is a stranger to the person who answers the phone, this helps him to decide if the absent person's child/wife/parent/grandchild (etc.) is appropriate for leaving a message with, inquiring when to phone again or, even, doing the whole business with. Obviously, the answerer can also say:

(15) Nie ma go/jej w domu.  
(He/She is not at home.)

It is not quite certain, however, what exactly conditions the use of one form or the other. The type of situation exemplified in (14) and (15) reveals also a significant difference between (American) English and Polish.

If, for example, the telephone rang at Dr. Stevenson's house and Mrs. Stevenson answered it the following exchange might take place:

(16) Caller: May I speak to Dr. Stevenson?

(17) Mrs. S.: I'm sorry, (a) he

(b) Dr. Stevenson is not at home.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This example was pointed out to me by Jędrzej Polak.

While the Polish equivalent of (17a) is possible (cf. 15), then the Polish version of (17b) would be very unlikely if possible at all. On the other hand, the equivalent of (14) seems to be very infrequent in English (perhaps except for children).

This brief analysis shows that the norm 'be informative', in the context of referring, requires 1. disambiguating the referent, and 2. making clear, unless this is signalled otherwise, the speaker's relation to the referent.

Appropriateness of referring is closely connected with the notion of politeness. For example, it is not always polite to refer to someone in English as "he"/"she". Faerch gives an example of a situation in which sociolinguistic factors account for the choice of proper names rather than personal pronouns in referring: "Child: 'She says she's hungry'. Mother: 'You don't say she! Say Aunt Mary!'. Child: 'Aunt Mary says she's hungry!'" (Faerch 1977: 65, footnote 5). Fillmore (1975: 80) says that "in English of people over thirty the use of a personal pronoun as a term of first reference is considered rude". There is also a wide range of restrictions on the use of personal pronoun in Polish, and it seems that even in those situations where English would permit *he/she* their equivalents would not do. First, let us consider why this is so.

The English sentence:

(18) He had to stay in bed for two weeks.

may have two realizations in Polish depending on whether the optional Pronominal Subject Deletion transformation applies or not. Thus:

(19a) On musiał leżeć w łóżku przez dwa tygodnie.

or

(19b) Musiał leżeć w łóżku przez dwa tygodnie.

A similar transformation does not apply to most English sentences (e.g., except imperatives) (cf. Fisiak, et al. 1978). Since in Polish the pronominal subject is optional from the syntactic point of view an explanation as to why it appears in some utterances but not in others may be provided by pragmatics. In this respect Polish would reveal the same property as Italian, as reported by Bates et al. (1980). Here is what they say on the use of referring expressions in Italian, in connection with one of their experiments:

"From this audiotape we derive three kinds of referring expressions: names, pronouns, and phrases in which the subject of the sentence was deleted. In English, which does not permit subject deletion under most conditions, the default form of reference for unmarked cases is pronominalizations. In Italian, pronouns are more marked when compared with the option of subject deletion. [...]

"It may be that the decision to use an explicit form of reference involves the need to highlight, dramatize, mark topic shifts and important points, and generally "stage" utterances in a way that assures the listener's attention. Hence explicit forms tend to be used at high-interest points (even when they are not necessary for disambiguation)" (Bates et al. 1980: 45, 47).

It is also possible now to consider several situations in which the use of *on/ona* in Polish is marked and those in which it is inappropriate to use these pronouns to refer.

It is not appropriate to use *on/ona* to refer to someone who is present (i.e., hears the utterance). The following exchange seems to be a good reflection of an improper use of the pronoun:

- (20) A: Czy on też przyjdzie? (Is he coming too?)  
 B: Co za "on"? (What do you mean by "he"?)  
 A: To znaczy Piotr. (I mean Piotr.)  
 B: Oczywiście że przyjdę. (Of course I'm going.)

It may have been enough to insult B by A's directing the question to somebody else, and so indicating that B is not perceived as responsible for himself (provided B is considered an adult). Moreover, B may have felt as deprived of his identity, personality, or uniqueness, the obvious linguistic indication of which for every one is one's name.

However, in some situations *on/ona* can be used to refer to a person present, but the speaker has to signal somehow that it is not to be understood as a marker of impoliteness. Sometimes it can be a bow to the referent or the use of the pronoun may be followed by a relatively fixed phrase "on/ona przez duże "O" (on/ona with a capital "O"). Another case might be when the utterance is to compliment, defend, praise or complain about someone. The following exchange between friends has been recorded and B is trying to defend C"

- (21) A to C: Ty to się nie przemęczasz w pracy.  
 (You don't get over-tired at work.)  
 B to A: On pracuje po nocach w domu.  
 (He works home at night.)

One of the reasons a person cannot speak in his own defence is that he is not present, and the speaker (as in 21) may justify the use of *on/ona* by imagining or pretending this is the case. The use of the pronoun in (21) may also be accounted for by the fact that, as mentioned above, the conversation involved participants among whom 'friend-friend' role-relationship was present.

People very often prefer to praise others in their absence. They feel that to do otherwise may result in the referent's embarrassment or, worse, too much pride, aloofness, and the like. Consequently, when the speaker says something good about someone he may consider that the referent should not be present which would also justify the use of *on/ona*.

On the other hand, using *on/ona* when expressing one's anger about the referent may be an additional (to intonation, for example) formal means of signalling the negative attitude. Here the pronoun functions as an effective substitute for some kind of negative description of the referent. Compare:

- (22a) Czy wiesz co ona zrobiła? Znowu zbiła szklanke.  
 (Do you know what she did? She broke another glass.)  
 (22b) Czy wiesz co ta niezdara zrobiła? Znowu zbiła szklanke.  
 (Do you know what this clod did? She broke another glass.)

One does not normally refer with *on/ona* to the addressee's close members of the family; especially to one's parents. The same holds true when referring to one's own parents (and usually grandparents). Pronouns are fairly often used to refer to kin of the same or descending generation. The pattern reveals respect of the young to the old, and superiority of older generations over younger generations.

That it is inappropriate to refer to one's parent with *on/ona* is illustrated by a reported example of an utterance by a mother to her son about his father.

- (23) Nie wiem jeszcze jak on chce zrobić. Jak tata chce zrobić.  
 (I don't know yet how he wants to do it — how daddy wants to do it.)

Even a person so close to the referent as his wife "corrects" herself speaking about the addressee's father.

The possible indication of disrespect in *on/ona* restricts in the same way their use in referring to one's superiors when talking to another superior. The following exchange has taken place at a students' meeting between a student and the tutor:

- (24) Tutor: Czy może mi pan powiedzieć jak to się stało?  
 (Can you tell me how it happened?)  
 Student: Więc tak. Ona przyszła...  
 (Well, yes. She came...)  
 Tutor: Kto???  
 (Who???)  
 Student: No, pani profesor X.  
 (Oh, (Mrs.) Professor X.)

Other languages show various other rules governing the system of referring with the third person pronouns. In standard Japanese<sup>5</sup> the system of referring to a third person with the use of pronouns<sup>6</sup> is based on the following factors or their combinations: presence or absence of the referent, relative status of the speaker and the referent, relative attitude towards the referent, and familiarity of the speaker with the addressee.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Yoko Nakamura and Kristen Refsing, Mag. art. for providing me with the data on Japanese.

<sup>6</sup> The word "pronoun" used in the case of the Japanese terms discussed here is a little misleading. They are not "pure" pronouns like *he/she* or *on/ona*. They function as pronouns but, in fact, are different deictic categories meaning 'this person', 'that person over there', and so on.

If the non-kin referent is not present the speaker may say *ano hito* which means either 'he' or 'she' depending on the context of the utterance, and is "ordinary" and "neutral" with regard to the degree of respectability for the referent. *Kare* ('he') and *kanojo* ('she') correspond to *ano hito* except that they clearly specify the sex of the referent. The respectful pronoun of reference (used to refer to much older people, distant superiors, etc.) is *ano kata* and it is not marked for sex. It is considered very rude and impolite to refer to someone who is not present with *aitsu*, unless the addressee is on extremely good terms with the speaker. In such a situation *aitsu* (usually heard among young males) loses its rude meaning.

When the referent is present the speaker can choose among three pronouns with which he can refer to that person (again if it is not a member of the speaker's family as referring to kin requires different forms). They are all unmarked for sex. *Kono hito* is "ordinary" and "neutral" while *kono kata* is respectful.

Additionally, two other pronouns, *sono hito* ("neutral") and *sono kata* ("respectful"), are used to refer to individuals who are absent but not too far away. They may, for example, have just left the room where the conversation is taking place. The two terms are also used to refer to individuals that are absent but were mentioned or talked about already in the ongoing conversation.

Significant observations concerning referring arise in connection with sex of the referent. Robin Lakoff (1975) presents an interesting discussion of differences in referring to men and women in English. The author gives evidence that parallel referring expressions, such as *master/mistress, bachelor/spinster, widow/widower* are used differently, and points to differences in the use of such referring titles as *Mr., Mrs., and Ms.* She also makes the claim that in professional relations where it is appropriate to refer to a man with his last name only, which "seems to be a mark of his acceptance as a colleague and a person to be taken seriously as a fellow member of the profession. [...] it is 'we know each other well; we are equals and pals, or equals and colleagues'. [...] But for a woman this is much less common" (Lakoff 1975: 37-39).

An interesting example of differences in referring to men and women in Polish is provided by Polish TV and radio news bulletins. Very often women from the political scene are referred to with the title *Pani* ('Miss'/'Mrs'), preceding their name. The title *Pan* ('Mr.') is never used in referring to male politicians. Compare the following:

- (25) Premier Indii pani Indira Ghandi spotkała się wczoraj z prezydentem Stanów Zjednoczonych (a) Ronaldem Reaganem  
(b) \*panem Ronaldem Reaganem.

(Yesterday, the prime minister of India, Mrs. Indira Ghandi, met the president of the United States (a) Ronald Reagan  
(b) Mr. Ronald Reagan.)

In face-to-face interactions the choice of a referring expression may be determined by "the speaker's taking the addressee's point of view" (Fillmore 1975: 82). Fillmore illustrates this issue from the domain of the family. When a mother is talking to her child about her husband she will say "Daddy", when she is talking about her father she will say "Grandpa", and so on. It is also possible to find examples of this kind elsewhere.

In Polish universities, in student-tutor relations, other tutors are referred to by the title+last name by both parties. Even if both tutors (the speaker and the referent) are on a first name basis, it is unlikely that the addressee's (here student's) point of view will not be adopted therefore a more formal form of reference will be used.

It is noteworthy that both examples above take into consideration situations in which a superior is talking to an inferior (mother to child, tutor to student). In these two situations the inferiors will not adopt the same technique of referring to the same referent (i.e., by taking the addressee's point of view). It is not common to hear a child asking his mother something like:

(26) \*Do you think Mum John will take me to the Zoo on Sunday?  
about his father.<sup>7</sup>

Like the choice of an appropriate form of address, the choice of a referring expression may be an indication of politeness, respect or the degree of familiarity with the referent. Thus, it is to be expected that referring can also be used as a powerful means of showing disrespect or no recognition of familiarity with the referent. Let us use literary examples to illustrate the point. In the following quotations Ethel reacts against her father's deliberate indication of his hostile attitude towards her fiancé:

(27) "By the way, his name is Teddy. I'm going to do everything I can for *Teddy*. Including giving children to *Teddy*. *Teddy's* father made me promise that, a sacred oath. And I did."

<sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact in both Polish and English cultures there are families to be found in which children address and refer to their parents with first names. Examples of this kind are also present in literature as in Harper Lee's "To kill a mockingbird": "Miss Caroline told me to tell my father not to teach me any more, it would interfere with my reading. "Teach me?" I said in surprise. "He hasn't taught me anything, Miss Caroline. Atticus ain't got time to teach me anything" I added, when Miss Caroline smiled and shook her head." (Lee 1974: 23).

and

- (28) "Now you've started on Teddy. 'I suspect saints', you said, 'I enjoy bastards'. You haven't yet said his name. 'Your new man!' It's Teddy, Teddy, Teddy!"<sup>8</sup>

(Kazan 1968: 88, 92—93)

A related example of the use of referring expressions is found in Hemingway's short story "Cat in the rain" (Hemingway 1964). However, it is the narrator here who indicates his changes of attitude to the character.<sup>9</sup> The main characters in the story are two Americans — husband and wife. At the beginning the attitude to the wife is neutral. The expression used to refer to her is 'the American wife'. Later, when she reveals herself to be rather infantile and self-centred the term of reference is 'the American girl'. Finally, when the attitude to the woman becomes fully negative, and the husband, now referred to by his first name (George), gains the sympathy of the reader, she is referred to as 'his wife'.

Still another quotation provides an example of irony expressed by a particular use of the referring expression 'the lady':

- (29) "The waiter was at their table and expertly carving their duck. The wine was in the cooler. 'No olives for me, please' Ida said. 'Give them all to the lady.'" (Shaw 1979: 179)

The situation in which Ida refers to the other woman (Gretchen) as 'the lady' indicates that she is making fun of her. Another interpretation possible is that Ida herself does not consider herself a lady.

In sum, although still too little data seems to have been provided for a detailed and comprehensive discussion of sociolinguistic aspects of referring, certain general concluding statements can be formulated:

1. the main social factors determining the choice of a referring expression or pronoun are: the respective statuses and relations holding between the speaker, hearer and referent; sex of the referent and the presence or absence of the referent from the speech situation in which the act of reference is made;
2. referring, in order to be successful, has to be informative and socially appropriate;

<sup>8</sup> An American lady has told me about a similar situation she experienced in the past. Her husband's guardians referred to her as 'that girl' until they got married.

<sup>9</sup> I owe this example to Dr. Malcolm Coulthard who discussed the stylistic features of this short story at the "Stylistics Seminar" held at Gdańsk University from 31 March to 3 April 1980.

3. referring can be a means of the speaker's signalling of his attitude towards the referent;
4. the sociolinguistic aspects of referring vary from language to language as the parallel forms (pronouns) may undergo different rules.

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