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978-0-521-87245-4 - Person Reference in Interaction: Linguistic, Cultural, and Social Perspectives

Edited by N. J. Enfield and Tanya Stivers

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## Person reference in interaction

How do we refer to people in everyday conversation? No matter the language or culture, we must choose from a range of options: full name ('Robert Smith'), reduced name ('Bob'), description ('tall guy'), kin term ('my son'), epithet ('birthday boy') and so on. Our choices reflect how we know that person in context, and allow us to take a particular perspective on them. This book brings together a team of leading linguists, sociologists and anthropologists to show that there is more to person reference than meets the eye. Drawing on video-recorded, everyday interactions in nine languages, it examines the fascinating ways in which we exploit person reference for social and cultural purposes, and reveals the underlying principles of person reference across cultures from the Americas to Asia to the South Pacific. Combining rich ethnographic detail with cross-linguistic generalizations, it will be welcomed by anyone interested in the relationship between language and culture.

NICHOLAS ENFIELD and TANYA STIVERS are scientific staff members in the Language and Cognition Group of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen.

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N. J. Enfield and Tanya Stivers

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521872454](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521872454)

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First published 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Person reference in interaction: linguistic, cultural, and social perspectives / edited by N. J. Enfield, Tanya Stivers.

p. cm. – (Language, culture, and cognition; no. 7)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-87245-4 (hardback: alk.paper)

ISBN-10: 0-521-87245-6 (hardback: alk.paper)

1. Reference (Linguistics) 2. Language and culture. I. Enfield, N. J., 1966- II. Stivers, Tanya.

P325.5.R44P44 2007

415–dc22 2006036484

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## Preface

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This is the first collective work to emerge from the Multimodal Interaction Project, within the Language and Cognition Group at the Max Planck Institute, Nijmegen. In this project, we are concerned with describing the formal features of human social interaction, and characterizing their underlying principles. Language is of course at the heart of it, but our guiding position is that face-to-face interaction provides the infrastructure for language in all its facets: production, comprehension, acquisition and structuration. In practice, language is woven into the full visible and interactional setting. Through a range of disciplinary approaches the project asks what makes it possible for human beings to be able to navigate their exceedingly complex social worlds with such aplomb. The topic of ‘person reference’ provides an ideal case study: the simple act of referring to someone takes us straight to the core of multimodal interaction, to the mechanics of conversation, and to a set of fundamental issues in linguistics, sociology and social anthropology.

The chapters of this book take a broadly semiotic approach to the problem of social action. The key skill is people’s ability to recognize and understand others’ actions through their public behavior. One source of guidance for any social participant is the stock of cultural norms: a culture, as Sacks put it, is ‘an apparatus for generating recognizable action’. This suggests variation between human groups, as supported to some degree by this book’s findings. And to the extent that there are natural or otherwise emergent principles of ‘recognizability of action’, we may expect universals in the organization of human social interaction as well (as Sacks no doubt did). Here, again, this book contributes, with evidence for robust underlying principles governing practices of person reference across varied cultures. The relationship between universals and particulars reflects the fundamental questions of anthropology and its subdisciplines: how do humans as a species differ from the other animals, and how do we differ from each other? We hope that this book may serve as a tool for investigating these larger issues of the general, and the particular, in human social life.

Nijmegen October 2006

N. J. ENFIELD and TANYA STIVERS



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## Acknowledgements

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This book represents many ideas that were brought to, and generated by, a workshop on Person Reference in Interaction held at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen. Nearly all of the contributors to this volume presented this work at that meeting as did Vicki Bruce, John Lucy, Leo Noordman and Wietske Vonk. There were many other people who attended the meeting and through discussions both during the meeting and in informal discussion influenced our collective thinking on this topic but whose specific contributions cannot so readily be identified. We thank all of these individuals as well. For assistance with the preparation of this book, we thank Paula Dings, Nikki de Jong and particularly Erica Renckens. We thank Helen Barton of CUP for her support of the project.

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