

1 Reference and Meaning

1.1 Reference and Pragmatics

This is a book about the pragmatics of reference. When we communicate through language we inevitably talk about things. Those things might be people, places or objects, or they might be thoughts, ideas, emotions or abstract concepts. To talk about things, we need to refer to things, and this book is about how we refer to things. Consider the utterances in (1) to (3), uttered by Maggie to Glenn.

- (1) When Darryl told Rick about what happened, he started crying.
- (2) When Darryl told Rick about what happened, Darryl started crying.
- (3) When Darryl told Rick about what happened, the idiot started crying.

To interpret these utterances, Glenn must form a hypothesis about what Maggie intended to communicate, and to do this he must assign reference to each of the referring expressions that she uses. He must work out who the names *Darryl* and *Rick* pick out in the world and, likewise, who the pronoun *he* and the definite description *the idiot* are intended to refer to in this discourse context. When a speaker constructs an utterance, she will often, if not always, have more than one option available to her in terms of the referring expression that she chooses to use.¹ The utterances in (1) to (3), for example, represent three possible means by which Maggie could convey the same basic message to Glenn. That is, it is possible that the noun phrase in subject position in the reporting clause is intended to refer to the same individual, say Darryl, in each case. An account of how reference functions as a component of utterance interpretation must, therefore, address the question of why a speaker might use a pronoun on one occasion, a name on another, and a definite description on yet another. My first objective in this book is to offer a pragmatic account of

¹ Throughout this book I follow the convention of referring to a speaker as *she* and a hearer as *he*. No additional cognitive effects are intended by these uses. I also refer to the *speaker* and *hearer* of *utterances* throughout and in general, even if, in some cases, the utterance may be written rather than spoken.

2 Reference and Meaning

reference which can explain the motivation behind a speaker's choice of referring expression.

Once a speaker has produced an utterance, the hearer must work out the meaning that the speaker intended to convey. A crucial part of this is working out to what or to whom the speaker is referring. Decoding the linguistic material in the referring expression will be the first step in this process, but then the hearer must use this material to identify the intended referent within the specific discourse context of use. Reference is ultimately an inferential task. As Cruse (2011: 381) explains, 'reference is not an inherent property of expressions, but is a speech act'. When Maggie utters (1) to Glenn, Glenn needs to form a hypothesis about who Maggie intends to refer to by her use of the pronoun *he*. It is then the properties of this referent which will determine whether Maggie has said something true or false. That is, it is the referent of the referring expression which contributes to the truth conditions of the utterance. If Maggie, for example, intended to refer to Rick, then she has communicated a different proposition than if she intended to refer to Darryl. The two propositions will be true in different conditions. If Glenn resolves reference on Darryl when Maggie intended to refer to Rick, then he will have misunderstood Maggie's utterance. As this example illustrates, a hearer's task when resolving reference will often involve choosing between more than one referent. That is, there may be more than one potential referent in the discourse context. The referring expression that the speaker uses is one way in which she can guide the hearer in the task of identifying the intended referent. This brings me to my second objective. The account of reference presented here aims to explain what is encoded by different referring expression types, and how, when communication is successful, this encoded meaning guides the hearer to the speaker's intended message.

Finally, as the utterance in (3) illustrates, a speaker can use her utterance to communicate something more than just the identity of the intended referent. In (3), Maggie uses her referring expression to communicate her attitude towards the intended referent, and we learn something about Maggie's view of the world that was not available via the versions in (1) and (2). Glenn will not have fully derived Maggie's overall intended meaning if his interpretation does not include this extra information.

My third key objective in this book is to explore how speakers use referring expressions to communicate beyond reference. I will consider how and why they use referring expressions to communicate their emotions and attitudes and to create stylistic and poetic effects. Thus, the discussions in this book aim to address three main research questions:

1. What motivates a speaker to use one expression rather than another in a particular discourse context?

1.2 Perspectives on Reference

3

2. How do the components of a referring expression contribute to communication of the speaker's meaning? In other words, what do referring expressions encode, and how does this interact with the context?
3. What, beyond reference resolution, do referring expressions contribute to the overall speaker's meaning, and how?

I consider these questions from a pragmatic perspective. However, reference is central to several domains within the study of language and communication, and so I begin my discussions in the next section by briefly considering alternative perspectives on reference. I consider some key work from philosophical approaches to language, and I also consider some observations from work that takes a stylistic or discourse analytical approach to reference. While these approaches have a different focus at their cores, they provide important context for the subsequent discussions, and the insights they provide inform much of the work that follows.

1.2 Perspectives on Reference

Pragmatics is the study of language in use and of utterance interpretation, and as my focus in this book is how referring expressions are used and understood, the account outlined here is pragmatic in nature in this sense. That is, I focus on how reference functions within discourse contexts to contribute to the meaning that is communicated by a speaker when she produces an utterance. Reference, however, is central to several other related disciplines including philosophy of language and stylistics, and I briefly consider here some of the work from these perspectives to both highlight how these differ from the pragmatic approach adopted in this book, and to draw on some of the relevant insights that they offer.

Traditionally, philosophers of language are concerned with reference as 'a semantic relation between linguistic expressions and things' (Abbott 2010: 3). Work by Mill (1843), Frege (1948) and Russell (1905; 1911) amongst others, has been hugely influential in shaping how we understand the contributions that referring expressions make to the truth conditions of a sentence and thus to their context-independent meaning. As Givón (2001: 438) explains, 'reference ("denotation") was held in the logical tradition to be a mapping between referring expressions in languages (NPs) and entities that existed in the RW [real world]'. To capture this relationship, these philosophical accounts tend to recognise a distinction between the entity that an expression picks out in the world and the descriptive content, if there is any, of the expression. For Mill (1843), this was a distinction between the 'denotation' of a term and its 'connotation'. For him, the denotation of an expression is what it may be applied to in the real world, whereas its connotation is its descriptive meaning. Frege (1948: 210) proposed a distinction between what he called 'sense' and

‘reference’, with reference being the entity to which the expression refers, and sense being the ‘mode of presentation’. Russell (1905) drew the distinction in terms of how a person thinks of an individual. Some expressions, such as names, are, for Russell, simply a label for an individual with which we have direct acquaintance. Such expressions are treated as ‘referring’. Definite descriptions, on the other hand, pick out the entity via the properties in the descriptive content and are treated as ‘denoting’. See Abbott (2010) and Powell (2010) for excellent overviews of these hugely significant philosophical accounts. These distinctions between ‘denotation’ and ‘connotation’, ‘sense’ and ‘reference’ and ‘referring’ and ‘denoting’ are designed to capture the contributions that expressions make to the truth conditions of a sentence, independent of the context in which it is used. In this book, my focus is on how speakers and hearers use and interpret referring expressions. That is, I will try to understand what takes a hearer from the decoding of linguistic material within a noun phrase (NP) to a hypothesis about the speaker’s intended meaning, and how a speaker uses her choice of linguistic expression to guide the hearer in forming this hypothesis. This is a process that takes place whenever an NP is used, and I will use the terms ‘referring’ and ‘reference’ in this general sense to mean any occasion on which a hearer must process a noun phrase. In this respect, I follow Givón (2001: 437) when he notes that ‘the grammatical coding of reference in human language turns out to be highly sensitive to the discourse-pragmatic – extra-clausal – context’. As he goes on to explain, in this pragmatic approach, reference is ‘a mapping from linguistic expressions to individuals established verbally in the Universe of Discourse’ (2001: 438), and that crucially ‘[e]xistence in the Universe of Discourse . . . is existence in some type of mental representation in the speaker’s mind’ (2001: 459). I provide more detail on what I mean by a mental representation and on the role that this plays in my pragmatic analysis in Section 2.3.

In the study of reference, a distinction is generally made between definite and indefinite reference. In this book, I focus, for the most part, on those referring expressions that are usually classified as definite: definite descriptions (Chapter 4), pronouns, both overt (Chapter 5) and null (Chapter 6), and demonstratives (Chapter 7). Abbott (2004) discusses various accounts of what it means for a noun phrase to be definite rather than indefinite. That is, she discusses what she terms ‘the essence of definiteness’ (2004: 122). She considers specificity, uniqueness and familiarity as candidate properties for defining definiteness, but finds none of these entirely satisfying. The account that I will outline in this book takes a different approach, focusing on the cognitive processes involved in the pragmatic task of reference resolution and of utterance interpretation more generally. I will argue that definiteness is not something that is encoded by some referring expressions and not by others. Rather, the types of referring expression that are generally thought of as being definite all share a part of their

encoded meaning. This shared meaning takes the form of an instruction or procedure which guides the hearer in the reference resolution process, and often, but not always, results in interpretations in which the referent is specific, unique and familiar. These properties arise from the interaction between the encoded procedure and the discourse context, and thus are pragmatic in nature.

Finally, reference has been a key concern of those working on the stylistic analysis of texts and in the analysis of interaction and discourse more generally. One of my objectives in this book is to provide a pragmatic perspective on many of the issues that such accounts address, and to offer a cognitive pragmatic perspective on the patterns and stylistic effects that they identify. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), reference is a cohesive device which plays an important role in creating the 'texture' of a text and thus allowing it to function as a unit. In their discussion, they distinguish between exophoric reference where the referring expressions used correspond to elements in the non-linguistic context, and endophoric reference where the expressions are co-referential with something in the accompanying text. They then discuss how different types of reference are associated with different genres of text and with different communicative contexts. For example, they observe that children's discourse and discourse within close-knit social groups is 'characterised by a tendency towards exophoric reference' (Halliday & Hasan 1976: 36).

In their discussion of pragmatics and reference, Culpepper and Haugh (2014) identify different forms of referring, including deixis and anaphora, and they suggest that some referring expressions are 'more semantic', while others are 'more pragmatic' (2014: 15). They make an observation which is key to my discussions here. They note that referring expressions may contribute to the overall interpretation of a discourse in a way that goes beyond resolving reference. Culpepper and Haugh describe examples where referring expressions are used to create common ground and to communicate 'psychological prominence or a particular viewpoint' or to 'signal a particular interpersonal meaning such as relative power' (2014: 44). This book draws on such observations and attempts to account for this wider range of referential effects within a general and established pragmatic framework.

In general, my focus in this book will not be on classifying referring expressions into types or on identifying particular categories of use. Existing typographies of referential expressions greatly inform my work and provide useful coverage of the role that reference and referring expressions play in language and communication. It is not, therefore, my aim to reproduce them here. Similarly, my aim is not to describe or catalogue the stylistic or discourse effects that a writer or speaker can achieve via her use of reference. Again, these are amply covered elsewhere (Lakoff 1974; Halliday & Hasan 1976). My focus in this book is on the processes that a hearer goes through in terms of

utterance interpretation when he encounters a referring expression. An understanding of these processes will also provide insight into the referential choices that are made by a speaker. In the discussion of each referring expression type, I will consider examples where the choice of expression contributes to stylistic effects. My aim is to show how the effects that arise are linked to the pragmatic processes that the hearer goes through when he interprets the referring expression in a specific discourse context. Why is it, for example, that close-knit social groups use more exophoric reference; that is, how does reference contribute to intimacy effects? How does the choice of referring expression contribute to the communication of a speaker's viewpoint? How might we understand the patterns which emerge when language is used and processed within discourse contexts, and how do these patterns contribute to the style or genre of a text? Any stylistic, interactional or discourse effects which arise from choice of referring expression are, I will argue, a result of the encoded meaning of the referring expression interacting with a hearer's assumptions about the discourse context while constrained by universal cognitive pragmatic processing procedures.

1.3 Structure of the Book

This book is divided into two main parts. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with theoretical issues pertaining to our understanding of how referring expressions contribute to a speaker's communicated meaning. Chapters 4 to 7 then apply the approach to the analysis of different referring expression types.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the theoretical assumptions that underpin the pragmatic analyses in this book. I introduce the principles of relevance, and discuss associated concepts and assumptions including the notion of procedural meaning. I give a brief outline of an early relevance-based approach to reference from Wilson (1992), and argue that taking optimal relevance as the criterion of pragmatic acceptability offers important insights into the reference resolution process. In the second half of Chapter 2, I introduce the cognitive assumptions that underpin my account. Following Recanati (2012; 2014), Reboul (1998; 1999) and Jackendoff, Cohn and Griffith (2012), I argue that reference resolution is the process of mapping conceptual files onto slots in the logical form of an utterance. This leads me to ultimately argue for a procedural analysis of referring expressions.

In Chapter 3, I provide an overview of two influential activation-based procedural approaches to reference: Accessibility theory (Ariel 1988; 1990; 1991; 2001) and the Givenness Hierarchy (Gundel, Hedberg & Zacharski 1993; Gundel 2010; Hedberg, Gundel & Borthen 2019). Both these broadly procedural approaches have been claimed to not only be compatible with relevance theory, but to be necessary in addition to the relevance-theoretic framework.

Relevance theory alone, it is claimed, cannot account for all the data. While I agree that these accounts are not sufficient, I argue that they also introduce unnecessary theoretical machinery in the form of scales or hierarchies of activation. Over the remaining chapters, I present an alternative account on which the encoded content of a referring expression interacts with the discourse context to yield overall interpretations that are ultimately driven and constrained by considerations of relevance.

In Chapter 4, I present a relevance-based analysis of definite descriptions. I consider how the various components of a definite description contribute to the communication of a speaker's overall intended meaning. I argue for a procedural analysis of the definite determiner *the*, building on the work of Powell (2010) and Jackendoff et al. (2012). I then consider the role played by the descriptive, conceptual content contained within a definite description, and how this may contribute to the speaker's meaning. The discussions in this chapter offer a pragmatic take on ongoing debates that are of interest to those working on reference from a philosophical perspective. I discuss how we can understand cases of misdescriptions (Section 4.2) and how we can capture the referential-attributive distinction (Section 4.3). In Section 4.4, I turn my attention to how definite descriptions can be used to create extra effects and to communicate the speaker's attitudes and emotions. The discussions in this section will be of particular interest to those working in stylistics or discourse analysis.

In Chapter 5, the focus turns to pronouns, and I present a fully procedural analysis of personal pronouns in English. I argue that rather than encoding concepts relating to person, number or gender, pronouns encode procedures which operate sub-personally to reflect a speaker's categorisation of the referent. In Section 5.4, I consider how these procedures interact with prosodic cues that a speaker may use, drawing on a link between processing effort and a hearer's expectations. In Section 5.5, I turn my attention to examples where the use of a particular pronoun creates stylistic or poetic effects. The role that pronouns may play in creating such effects is then further explored in Chapter 6. While null subjects are not generally considered to be an option in English, they can be found in certain discourse contexts including personal diaries and digitally mediated communication. The approach to reference presented in this book offers a new perspective on these seemingly exceptional examples. I discuss how the conceptual file approach to reference and a procedural analysis of pronouns can shed interesting new light on null subjects in English, and I show how different examples are ultimately all motivated by considerations of relevance.

In Chapter 7, I consider how demonstratives fit into the relevance-driven, procedural analysis of referring expressions proposed in this book. I provide a brief overview of the range of functions and communicative effects that have previously been associated with demonstratives, before arguing in favour of

8 Reference and Meaning

a unitary analysis. While the procedures encoded by the demonstrative determiners may contribute to relevance by guiding the hearer to an intended referent, they may also be used to imply a contrast of some sort. These implicated effects are highly context sensitive, and I discuss examples where the speaker's choice of definite determiner can create subtle stylistic effects.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I bring together the themes of the book and summarise the main implications of my account for our understanding of reference, procedural meaning and pragmatic interpretation in general.

2 Relevance, Reference and Procedures

2.1 Relevance Theory

Cognition and Communication

Relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986/95; Blakemore 1992; Carston 2002a; Wilson & Sperber 2012; Clark 2013) offers a cognitive approach to utterance interpretation. It is based on two principles of relevance. According to the first principle of relevance, also known as the cognitive principle, human cognition tends to be geared towards the maximisation of relevance. That is, we tend to focus our cognitive resources on those inputs which, when processed, are most likely to lead to positive effects within our cognitive environments (Sperber & Wilson 1986/95; Carston 2002a: 44–7; Sperber 2005; Wilson & Sperber 2012). Our cognitive environments are made up of the assumptions that we hold about the world. For example, as I write this, I hold the assumptions that it is Tuesday and that I will go to the cinema this evening. I am likely to hold these assumptions with differing degrees of certainty. I am fairly sure which day of the week it is, and it is unlikely that any new piece of information will cause me to change this assumption. However, my evening plans are held with a lower degree of certainty. There are various new pieces of information that could cause me to change them or abandon them altogether. The friend that I am planning to meet with might call me to cancel, or the cashier at the cinema ticket desk might inform me that there are no tickets available. Both these new inputs would require me to revise the assumptions that I hold about the world and about my evening plans. Both these inputs would therefore be relevant to me.

An input is relevant when it results in a positive cognitive effect. Positive cognitive effects can be achieved in one of three ways. First, the new information may strengthen an existing assumption by providing further evidence in support of it. To illustrate, consider Deirdre, who has been given tickets to the gentlemen's final at the Wimbledon tennis tournament. When she receives the tickets, she is very excited as she knows there is a chance that she will see her

10 Relevance, Reference and Procedures

favourite tennis player, Roger Federer, play in the final. He has been playing very well recently, and Deirdre holds the assumption that Federer will be in the final with a fair degree of confidence. The tournament begins and Deirdre, very busy with work, is unable to follow Federer's progress. However, towards the end of the first week, she manages to check the sports news online and she sees the headline in (1).

- (1) Federer breezes past opponents in first two rounds.

The new information in (1) strengthens her existing assumptions that Federer will reach the final and that she will see him play. She now holds these assumptions with a higher degree of confidence than she did previously. However, the next day, Deirdre once again checks the sports news and she sees the headline in (2).

- (2) Federer forced to retire from tournament due to injury.

Again, this new information has an effect on the assumptions that Deirdre holds. However, this time it affects her cognitive environment in a different way. The new information in (2) is incompatible with Deirdre's assumption that she will see Federer play in the final of Wimbledon. If she accepts the new information in (2) then she will no longer hold her original assumption. This illustrates the second type of cognitive effect identified by relevance theory: contradiction and elimination of an existing assumption.

The third and final type of cognitive effect is derived when new information from an input combines with an existing assumption to yield a contextual implication. For example, Deirdre wakes up early on the morning of the Wimbledon men's final and goes to the train station to catch her train. When she arrives at the station the information screen is displaying a message that says that there are delays on the line and advising customers to listen for more information. Deirdre's train was due at 11:00 and she knows that if it arrives before 11:30, then she will still be able to get to the tournament in time to see the match. That is, she holds the assumption in (3).

- (3) If the train arrives before 11:30, I will get to the tournament in time to see the match.

After a few minutes, she hears the announcement in (4).

- (4) We are sorry for the delay. The train that was scheduled to arrive at 11 am is on its way and will arrive at 11:20.

This new information combines with Deirdre's assumption in (3), and she is able to derive the contextual implication in (5).