

11 Conclusion: Doing Referring – in Murriny Patha Conversation and Beyond

Reference is one of the fundamental components in the interactional machinery. Because the referential process causes a recipient’s knowledge state to be updated – even when the process is not entirely successful – the process of referring sits at the heart of every conceivable activity that interlocutors need to do in interaction: converse, teach, learn, argue, berate, deride, enquire, chat up, tell stories, praise, convince, lie, brainstorm, etc. Like turntaking, it is one of the core processes that actually makes conversational talk interactional.

For the past forty odd years, conversation analysis has been providing important insights into referring processes in interaction. Because every society has culturally specific referring practices, every population has different ways of categorizing the world, and every language has different suites of referential options, we stand to learn a lot about new and already discovered referring processes by examining interactional talk conducted in typologically diverse languages. As a case-study, Murriny Patha conversation makes a particularly good choice (as the name would seem to suggest)³¹⁴ because in each of these respects, the talk is quite differently packaged from conversation conducted in major world languages with large societies. The value of this case-study lies not so much in knowing how referring is done differently, but in seeing that despite the obvious differences, much of what is done in reference is actually the same for all conversations, irrespective of the language and culture of the speakers.

The topic of this dissertation is the fundamentally important problem for all participants in talk-in-interaction, all of the time – “How do we know who we are talking about?” I have constrained the study of reference by concentrating on referring to persons. However, limiting the focus has had the effect of revealing referential processes that also have application for reference to non-human entities.

In Chapter 2 we examined a conversational narrative that revealed *referents* to be differently conceptualized by speakers and hearers. It also raised a conceptual problem for the common sense view that referents exist in the world; namely, “How

³¹⁴ *murriny patha*
 speech good
 NOMCL ADJ
 “[the] good language”

are speakers able to refer to things in the ‘world’ without knowing what it is in the ‘world’ they are actually referring to?” That speakers are able to do this calls for a better explanation of how referents are perceived and tracked by hearers, and how speakers conceive of what they are referring to.

In Chapter 3 I chronicled the history of the community of Wadeye and outlined the sociolinguistic setting for the study. Wadeye is the centre of a relatively closed universe where Murriny Patha speakers have been, to a certain degree, holding out against some of the major pressures that conspire against the persistence of minority languages. Significantly, the society is sufficiently small that all (adult Aboriginal) persons are known to each other and therefore have the potential to be recognized. Not only does every individual know the names of every other individual, they also know where they live, what clans they belong to, what totems they have, what country they have rights to, what music they associate with, who their relatives are, etc. They also know, or can compute, by which kinterms every individual refers to every other. Because of the numerous restrictions on personal names, for every speaker there is a multitude of people whose names should be avoided. If there are problems associated with the use of a particular individual’s name then there are a multitude of social relationships to draw on so as to bypass the use of the name.

In Chapter 4, I characterized the corpus of talk-in-interaction that forms the basis for this study. I also discussed my analysis. By adhering as closely as possible to the methodology of CA, I have sought to ground the analysis of referring processes in the co-participants’ orientation to the unfolding talk. Part of this process requires considerable ethnographic backgrounding. For example, micro-genealogies are regularly incorporated into the micro-analysis of talk fragments.

In Chapter 5, I reviewed the literature on person-reference, focusing on the required tools for analysis. The major analytic tools relate to *position* and *preference*. Most relevant is the use of reference forms, particularly with regards to where they are placed, and how they are able to satisfy the range of conversational preferences emerging from the prior research. For the analysis of Murriny Patha conversation, the tools relating to both *position* and *preference* require a degree of modification. In this chapter, I optimized some of the earlier preferences, arriving at a set of six – Minimization, Targeted Recipient Design, Generalization, Specification, Circumspection and Association – for use in the subsequent analysis.

Reference forms in polysynthetic languages like Murriny Patha require careful analysis. In Chapter 6, I examined in detail the types of expressions that are used as reference forms in Murriny Patha, providing a referential sketch grammar. Relevant here is how Murriny Patha speakers' categorizations of the world are reflected in the grammar of the language. Murriny Patha verbs and pronouns reflect a socio-centric universe in which kinship is central. Person, gender, number and siblinghood provide a referential scaffolding that divides the world into many possible groups of persons.³¹⁵ By contrast, the non-human world is divided into nine distinct classes of entities that are called on grammatically by nine (of the ten) nominal classes. The various nominal classes and pronominal denotata represent classifications of the universe that are drawn on by speakers for referring. Having established the forms used for referring in Murriny Patha, I then went on to consider the positions in which they are placed.

In Chapter 7, I have combined an analysis of form and position (Fox 1987; Schegloff 1996a) with an analysis of referential specificity (Levinson 2007). This revised view of reference initialization (which considers whether reference is established for the very first time, or re-established some time later) reveals overlapping systems of global and local anaphoric patterning. Firstly, there are two inherently unmarked patterns³¹⁶ representing normative referential practices, where the forms are not used for anything special beyond referring. Then there are four pragmatically marked deviations from these normative patterns, where special referential practices – over and above simply referring – are enacted by placing reference forms in unexpected positions. While the overlapping anaphoric patternings make a positional analysis more complicated, the resulting analysis is richer and more useful.

Having taken up the first set of analytic tools, those relating to position, in Chapter 8 I took up the second set, those relating to preference. Particularly, I examined how the six preferences identified in Chapter 5 manifest themselves as referential design principles for use in Murriny Patha conversation. Six categories of reference forms – each bearing different combinations of characteristic properties – are differentially weighted towards satisfying these six preferences. Each reference

³¹⁵ There are 26 possible pronominal denotata for subjects, 26 for direct objects and 27 for indirect objects.

³¹⁶ As stated previously, the unmarked status of the global pattern is somewhat complicated by its overlap with marked local patterns.

category has the capacity to satisfy different combinations of preferences, yet none is able to satisfy them all.

Various conflicting and compatible preferences push and pull speakers' choice of reference forms in different directions. In choosing the most appropriate reference forms, Murriny Patha speakers are both guided and constrained by (a) the contingencies relating to the unfolding interaction, (b) any contingencies specific to their culture and/or the specific to their situation (e.g., being in the presence of the mother of a deceased person), (c) what they personally aim to achieve at that moment of the interaction. They choose the most appropriate mix of preferences, based on a prioritization of their own personal objectives and any cultural, situational or interactional contingencies that might emerge.

Tracking referents in reported speech is especially challenging for recipients of a story. In Chapter 9, we examined some of the special tricks that storytellers use to assist their audience in perceiving referents. Globally Marked and Locally Marked Prosodic Reference are especially useful tools when Circumspection applies and the names of certain persons should be avoided. I will return to these special referring strategies below.

In Chapter 10, I drew on certain problematic passages of talk so as to present a nine-step interactional model of the process by which all reference is conducted. Four steps deal with how speakers come to choose the reference forms that they do, and then use them. Five steps deal with how recipients of a reference interpret the reference form(s), so as to perceive the referent and track it. This model depends on the notion that referents are differently conceptualized by speakers and hearers. Because talk-in-interaction reveals these varied conceptualizations, I decompose *referents* into two sub-types: the *speaker's referent* and the *hearer's referent*, each of which stands in indexical relationships to worldly participants and entities. The nine-step model is no guaranteed formula for success. Before reference can be deemed to be successful, there is a necessary condition to apply after the nine steps have been acquitted; namely, that speakers and hearers must have in mind the same worldly participants/entities.

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As stated previously, the main analytic tools relate to position and preference. Circumspection, the preference dealing with name avoidance under conditions of taboo, is important for shedding light on how other preferences impact on referential design. By removing personal names, the default class for recognitionals, further options must be co-opted for use as recognitionals. In this way, Circumspection provides insights into how recognitionals are actually perceived as being recognitional. It is the systematic way that certain reference forms are regularly placed in particular environments, and regularly used for performing particular sorts of activities, that makes the referential practices that speakers engage in recognizable to co-participants as practices they've encountered before. Systematic and regular name-avoidance practices, coupled with the knowledge of every person's name and knowledge of the relationships between each of those persons, results in the (recognitional) alternatives recruited instead of names being recognizable for their employment as avoidance recognitionals.

Central to recognitionals being perceived as recognitional is a noticeable "supposed prior knowledge association" of the referent to a targeted recipient. In the case of addressee-associated triangulations, this supposition of prior knowledge is made explicit. With other sorts of recognitionals, the association is via implication. Although we find that most reference forms recruited as recognitionals (names, nicknames, triangulations, etc.) are quite specific reference forms, there is one variety, the "recognitional inversion" that is not. It is for this reason that we require two distinct preferences, Specification and Targeted Recipient Design, to deal with the business of achieving recognition. "Recognitional inversions" are the use of either locally subsequent verbal cross-reference or globally subsequent free pronouns in globally initial reference positions. Having very broad denotata, the forms themselves are quite badly disposed towards achieving recognition. However when used for the first mention, they become noticeable as recognitional due to the noticeable implication that the speaker is supposing the targeted recipient to have prior knowledge of the referent. It is this supposition of prior knowledge that makes these specially positioned forms designed for receipt as recognitionals by targeted recipients. The systematic ways that the forms are used makes them noticeable as inviting targeted recipients' recognition of the referent. Yet inviting recognition is not the only thing that they are used for. Murriny Patha storytellers tend to place

recognitional inversions at the very beginning of a story (line 181 of Fragment 50, lines 517 and 518 of Fragment 76), or close to the beginning of a story (line 37 of Fragment 1). This invitation to recognize the referent provides storytellers with a baited hook by which to reel in their audience.

For targeted recipients, the implication that they are supposed to know what the speaker is talking about places the onus on them to work out what sort of underspecified referent is being referred to. This need to make mental leaps creates a tension that causes story recipients to sit up and take notice, in the hope that they can guess correctly. When Phyllis, in Fragment 76, uses verbal cross-reference for globally initial reference to two pairs of males, as well as an innuendo laden pro-term (the bare nominal classifier *ku*) for globally initial reference to spiny chitons (presuming that's what the reference was to!), it is hardly surprising that Elizabeth soon hangs off her every word.

For recipients who have no prior knowledge association with the referent (i.e., non-targeted recipients), such references are intriguing because of the further implication that there is something they should know about the referent. In this light, it is unsurprising that JC (Fragments 1-3 of Chapter 2/Fragment 79) makes such an effort to find out what Phyllis was referring to with her mysterious *ku*-reference. For non-targeted recipients, recognitional inversions create suspense. It is the desire to learn what it's all about that makes them sit up and listen.

Another enlightening aspect of the study is the discovery of just how much of their talk Murriny Patha speakers actually use for referring. Sometimes this is a question of doing more reference with less material. We see that in the context of reported speech, ill-fitting vocative kinterms enable an indexation of reported speakers and reported addressees that would otherwise require quotative expressions to be appended to the reported talk. Because these reference forms allow for the removal of the quotative appendages, the talk becomes more minimal whilst retaining the specific information necessary for achieving recognition. This makes for a satisfaction of Minimization and Specification that is detached from reference forms.

Prosodic reference furthers the speakers' capacity to pack extra referencing into their talk, without having to produce extra words. Local prosodic reference amplifies the indexical power of ill-fitting vocatives, extending the ability of these minimal expressions to make indexical specifications. Utilizing the prosodic domain for

reference, distinctive “local” marking specifies certain pairs of utterances as hailing from the same person, and other utterances as hailing from someone else; or, specifies that certain pairs of utterances are directed towards the same recipient, and that other pairs are directed towards different recipients. Similarly, distinctive global marking specifies pairs of reported turns as hailing from the same reported speaker and others as hailing from a different reported speaker. Once again, by allowing a storyteller to strip the quotative expressions from the talk being reported, the reporting of talk becomes more minimal whilst the specific information required for successful reference is maintained, thus making for snappier and more lively storytelling than if the quotative expressions were allowed to remain.

Leaving aside the special cases associated with reported interaction, there are other ways that speakers recruit more of their talk for referring. Thus, in addition to using denoting expressions for referring to referents, the utterances in which denoting expressions are placed can also play a role in *constraining the domain of reference*, even when they play no part in denoting the referent. In example 6.10 (p. 106), where the speaker notices the diarrhoea spilling from her cousin’s child, the verb *kambinyipakkurran*, “there is something spilling”, constrains the domain of reference of its subject so successfully that a globally subsequent bare nominal classifier (*mi*, “vegetable”) is all that is required for recipients to pick out that solitary liquid member of the vegetable class that she has in mind. This allows for a relaxation of Specification in favour of Generalization. Even though the globally subsequent reference form is used in globally initial position, this use of the form is completely unambiguous.

Maximally general are the implied references (“zeros”) – those references that actually lack overt denoting expressions. Sometimes it is the transitivity of a verb that tells recipients that a direct object is implied. At other times, recipients know from the prior turns that the current utterance is somehow “about” whatever has come before. In these cases, whole conversational turns are recruited for reference (as well as what came before), yet nothing particular within the turn can be pinned down as actually doing denoting.

Even for many regular locally initial references, a considerable amount of material seems to be used for referring. Co-referential denoting expressions recruit information from inside and outside the verb. In example 6.69 (*kardu ngalantharr*

*dirran'guwintharrarrthanginthakardi*, “the old man was looking around for the two females who weren't sisters”, p. 147), all but two of the eight morphemes in the clause are actually used for referring. These forms cannot (for the purpose of an interactional analysis) be practically pulled apart into separate components.

The lesson from this is that although it is reference forms that are physically articulated (and that are placed in particular reference positions), the information that a recipient requires is actually expressed by grammatical functions, rather than reference forms. Thus, rather than choosing from the denotata of denoting expressions, recipients of an utterance must select the referent they believe the speaker to have in mind from the *functional domain of reference* – the set of all entities exhibiting the properties characterizable by a subject or object argument. In Murriny Patha, semantic information such as person, number, gender and siblinghood is more likely to be expressed in the verb than by a noun phrase. The importance of arguments for reference is quite apparent in Murriny Patha, which so often pools referential information from different parts of the clause. This is obscured in English by the paucity of verbal agreement. However, as the sheep examples demonstrate (6.70 and 6.71, p. 152), the same also holds true for English.

Although we find that names, when unencumbered by restrictions, are regularly used for referring, the naming restrictions are actually what bring to the fore the other referring options available to speakers. This may be a case of using some sort of avoidance recognitional – a kinterm, an elided progeny construction, or even someone else's name. It may be a question of using special tricks, such as prosodic reference. It may be a question of using free pronouns or verbal cross-reference, either as a recognitional inversion, or by playing domains of reference against each other, so as to specify the individuals involved without actually referring to them singularly (e.g., Fragment 80). Here the limited pool of potential referents allows the syntax of the language to take over from names in securing a recipient's recognition. Murriny Patha's syntax is very much up to the task.

Many of the specialized referring practices encountered here are not unique to Murriny Patha and the cognitive implications of the study have implications for all reference. The name taboos, the smaller pool of recognizable referents, the knowledge of each other's relationships and associations make specialized referring practices surface in higher concentrations in this one-hour corpus than would otherwise be

found in comparative interactional corpora for more dominant languages spoken in larger societies.

The value of the study is that languages like Murriny Patha, with its heavily socio-centric and verby syntax, force the analyst to confront issues that the “usual suspect” languages do not so readily reveal: how referents are conceptualized and how the information that hearers need to perceive a referent is conveyed by arguments, rather than reference forms. The lessons to emerge from these Murriny Patha conversations seem fundamentally important for linguistics and for the study of human interaction. These conversational fragments reveal much about reference: what sort of process it is, what steps are required to bring it off successfully, and how it needs to be understood – by both participants and analysts alike.