1 Introduction

As the title of this thesis suggests, referring is taken to be an activity that speakers do when they talk. Obviously when they talk they do a range of other things as well as refer. In particular, this thesis concerns itself with how speakers refer to persons and what else they do by referring to them. The model of reference presumed here is an interactional one, whereby knowledge is imparted from a speaker to a hearer as an outcome of the referential process. Although Murriny Patha, “the good language”, is particular to a group of Aborigines from northern Australia, the insights gained about referential processes have much wider relevance than merely to Murriny Patha conversation. By moving the conversation analytic microscope to less frequently examined talk-in-interaction, a more complete picture of referential processes emerges.

Conversation analysis (CA) concerns itself with the study of mundane talk-in-interaction – the idea being that this mundane naturally occurring talk is in some sense basic, and that other varieties of language are derived from this basic variety. When we closely examine naturally occurring talk-in-interaction, we are guaranteed to observe interlocutors engage in a multitude of interactional operations and processes. Some operations, such as fourth position repairs (Schegloff 1992), are infrequently performed. Yet other processes, such as the taking of turns in conversation, are absolutely basic in that these are the ones that actually make conversation interactional. Referring in conversation is one of these basic processes that sit at the heart of interaction – it is a fundamental component of the interactional machinery.

For every language, speakers have a suite of referential options to choose from. If we are speaking English we can use names (e.g., Joe, Mrs Brown), nicknames (fatso, red-lips), pronouns (she, them), kin terms (my uncle), kin titles (daddy), descriptions (a guy from work, that loser) and combinations thereof (my uncle John the butcher). What are the factors that lead us to use a name on one occasion, a pronoun on the next, and a description on a further occasion? And what can we expect to achieve by choosing particular forms and placing them in particular environments?

These are interesting questions to ask, even for a language like English. However, there are many insights to be gained by investigating these issues in languages that have different suites of referential options. In this respect, Murriny Patha is a good candidate to choose because the suite of forms that are used for referring is quite
different from that of English. One major difference is that speakers use verbs for referring, and not merely the odd verbal affix.¹ There are in fact a range of different word classes that are recruited for referring, as well as for performing various other activities that speakers engage in when they talk. We can therefore expect to discover different sorts of practices that are specific to the culture of the speakers.

On the other hand, while the structure of the language and the geographical location might seem unusual territory for CA, many of the basic requirements and needs of interlocutors are much the same as they are for speakers of more dominant languages and cultures. Ironically, by observing conversations that might seem superficially different from those we are used to, we stand to learn new things about processes that are the same as or similar to our own. For example, whilst it might seem “exotic” that Murriny Patha speakers avoid naming various in-laws and avoid naming the deceased (and are thus more likely to refer to these persons using kinterms), interactional research amongst speakers of English is also likely to unearth parallel practices of name-avoidance that are perhaps less strictly applied.

The field research for this dissertation was conducted between 2004 and 2007, predominantly at the community of Wadeye (previously Port Keats) in the Northern Territory of Australia, in the traditional country of the language’s speakers.² When I began the research I had no expectations about what I might learn, except to say that I presumed I would learn something interesting. I never imagined that my own data would have me questioning the very nature of reference itself. If I could condense the findings of this thesis into a nutshell, it would be that Murriny Patha speakers use much more of their talk for referring than I had imagined possible.

In certain other disciplines reference is construed quite differently to the interactional model presented here. In philosophy and formal semantics, reference is predominantly defined in terms of truth. This way of construing reference is usually less concerned about the persons that use referential expressions, than about the expressions themselves. Much of the literature from those disciplines centres around what should or should not be considered as reference when certain sets of conditions

¹ For reasons of morphosyntactic complexity outlined in Chapter 6, it is neither practical nor realistic to construe affixes as referential items. Because of fusion and shared marking of semantic categories by multiple morphemes, it is preferable to speak of the whole verb being a complex word that is used for referring, as well as for a range of other linguistic and interactional tasks.

² A short block of field research was also conducted in the town of Kununurra, in Western Australia, where a few expatriate Murriny Patha speakers reside.
apply. By looking at the process of referring in naturally occurring talk-in-interaction, we can see successful reference for what it is, because subsequent interlocutors regularly display their understandings (or lack thereof) about who and what has been referred to. The basis for analyzing a reference as being successful (or otherwise) is grounded in the other participants’ orientation to the unfolding talk. Built into natural conversation is a certain proof procedure that allows us to avoid having to speculate about the veracity of individual references.

Sometimes however, for a native speaker of English, observing genuine referring in Murriny Patha conversation requires a paradigm shift in thinking. Different ways of categorizing the world make for different referential strategies. As an outsider looking in, the paradigm shift inevitably makes an analyst wonder about how the process is to be construed. Various fragments of conversation seemed to me so strange that I was forced to step back and ask myself, “How do interlocutors actually make sense of this?” As I listened to the talk unfolding, I tried to grasp how the intended recipients are supposed to understand this talk that is packaged so differently from my own. It is not always as bewildering as all that, though I’m sure readers will find the conversational narrative in Chapter 2 thought-provoking, to say the least.

Chapter 2, *The Story Begins*, is like an appetizer. It presents a story of reference. In a conversational narrative, a storyteller makes a very obscure reference that only one other person understands. The narrative becomes sidetracked and the interlocutors become confused about what had been said. One very persistent recipient of the story brings the storytellers back on track and ultimately, the elliptical nature of the obscure reference is revealed. The recipient does this by also referring to what the storyteller had referred to previously, even though she (the recipient) doesn’t know exactly what that was. The passage demonstrates that speakers and hearers each conceive of referents differently. This presents a conundrum. If speakers and hearers conceive of referents differently, what then are referents and how are they conceptualized? I conclude by proposing a solution to this problem that is further developed in Chapter 10.

The study is contextualized in Chapter 3, *The Sociolinguistic and Historical Background*. Wadeye, where the the bulk of the research was conducted, was one of the last corners of the continent to receive a permanent white population. As recently as 1935 a Catholic mission was established at what was then Port Keats. Since that
time the local language Murriny Patha has become the lingua franca of the region. Although Murriny Patha is an endangered language, it has gained strength at the expense of the various neighbouring languages that have all become severely endangered. The social institutions have been in considerable flux. The region has seen the wane of the patrimoieties, the adoption and abandonment of a subsection system, structural and terminological changes to the kinship system, the development of a system of tripartite ceremonial exchange, and the rise of large patronymic families and juvenile gangs.

Chapter 4, *The Nature of the Corpus*, deals with the data collection and the methodology employed to analyze the data. The chapter begins with the multidisciplinary research project into the Murriny Patha language and song, of which this study forms a part. My corpus of conversational interaction was built up whilst on excursions to the traditional estates of the conversationalists, who later assisted with transcription, translation and linguistic analysis of the material in the corpus. I describe how the natural conversation was collected and what the conversations are like. I then describe various discussions in Murriny Patha that were recorded during the course of collaborative research into the local song traditions. Finally I characterize my approach to analysis.

The major portion of the interactional corpus is included as Appendix D. Glossing for all discussed conversational fragments are included as Appendix C. The reader is also encouraged to become a listener by hearing the recordings corresponding to the discussed fragments. These are embedded into html pages included on the CD that is Appendix B.

Chapter 5, *Studies in Person Reference*, sets the thesis within the context of prior research. However it is more than just a literature review. Many of the notions that emerge from the literature require modification before they can be applied to Murriny Patha. Before embarking on the specifics of the research, I firstly explain my particular usage of certain technical terms: *sense, connotation, denotation, denotatum*. Two terms, *reference* and *referent*, I provide only working definitions of, because these notions will be developed at length throughout the thesis.

The chapter begins with Stanner’s seminal work at Port Keats in the 1930s (Stanner 1937) and then moves into interactional linguistics and conversation analysis. Schegloff (1996a) stresses the importance of distinguishing between
reference forms and reference positions. Reference forms that are typically “locally-initial” are the unmarked choice for use in “locally initial reference positions”; but when used in “locally subsequent” positions, take on a marked status. Similarly, “locally subsequent” reference forms (e.g., pronouns) are the unmarked choice for “locally subsequent” reference; but when used in “locally initial” positions, stand out quite considerably. By departing from the unmarked pattern (of using locally initial forms in locally initial positions and locally subsequent forms subsequently), speakers use these reference forms to do special interactional work, over and above simply referring to persons.

Particularly important in CA is the notion of preference. Emerging from the literature is a raft of conversational preferences that will be critically important for the remaining chapters. Included are preferences for the minimization of reference forms, for the use of recognitional reference forms (recipient design), for the association of the referent to the current conversation’s participants, and for showing circumspection by avoiding the default reference forms (normally personal names). Many of these require a degree of definitional adjustment because Murriny Patha is so different typologically from the languages that spawned these preferences. In addition to these, from Levinson’s (2007) maxims of recognition and economy, I peel off two opposing preferences dealing with referential specificity (Specification and Generalization), thus making six distinct preferences that will be required thereafter.

Chapter 6, Denotation in Murriny Patha Morphosyntax, looks at the sorts of words that are recruited for reference. The first part of the chapter is a sketch grammar focusing on the ways of representing reference. Murriny Patha is a nominally classifying, highly polysynthetic language with grammaticalized kinship categories. It is particularly rich from a person-reference perspective, with its extensive system of free and bound pronouns. The efficacy of this system is greatly boosted by coupling gender marking with a morphological distinction between siblings and non-siblings. These distinctions extend throughout first, second and third persons. I particularly investigate the morphology of Murriny Patha verbs and the complex interdependence between positional slots within the template of the verb.

The second part then moves to clauses – the syntactic building blocks of conversational turns (Thompson & Couper-Kuhlen 2005). What is important here is how different referential information is pooled from different parts of the clause. In
Murriny Patha, reference is frequently expressed both within the verb complex and externally with a co-referential noun phrase. Thus, I show that referents are actually expressed by grammatical arguments, rather than reference forms. Because of this, the true locus of reference is not so much the denotata of referential expressions, but the functional domain of reference. If the denotatum of a (denoting) expression is the set of possible referents from which the hearer should select the referent they believe the speaker to have in mind, then the functional domain of reference is the set of possible referents expressed by the information pooled from co-referential denoting expressions.

I begin Chapter 7, Patterns of Anaphora, by outlining the basic categories of Murriny Patha referential expressions (names, nicknames, minimal descriptions, etc.) and discuss their expected positionings (whether typically initial or typically subsequent). I find the “locally initial” and “locally subsequent” dichotomy too coarse for Murriny Patha, where free pronouns form an intermediate referential category that is used for “locally initial” reference, though is seldom used for the first mention. In other words, they are forms that are typically used for references that are both “locally initial” and “globally subsequent”. I firstly discuss the basic unmarked anaphoric positions (of using initial reference forms initially and subsequent reference forms subsequently). I then discuss the pragmatically marked inversions of form and position (e.g., using initial forms in subsequent positions and subsequent forms in initial positions). By introducing the “global” and “local” dichotomy, I am able to incorporate into this analysis the question of referential specificity. More specific reference forms are typically used to establish reference. Subsequent forms don’t require such specificity because they are typically used for re-reference. This patterning is captured on both global and local scales.

Chapter 8, Conversational Preferences and Referential Design, explores how the six preferences identified in Chapter 5 integrate as a system of referential design. I begin by showing how each of the six basic categories of reference forms introduced in Chapter 7 are well disposed towards simultaneously satisfying several preferences. At the same time, each preference has the possibility of being satisfied by more than one category of reference form, though a particular category might be better disposed toward a certain preference than forms from other categories. Thus, interlocutors ultimately choose the reference forms that best satisfy the mix of preferences most
appropriate to suit their own personal objectives, and any relevant cultural, situational or interactional contingencies.

I particularly explore the preferences for Association and Circumspection and how these two preferences are mutually compatible. Anchored kitems (e.g., my brother, your sister) and other “triangular” reference forms\(^3\) comprise the reference category most frequently used to satisfy the preference for Association (of the referent to the current conversation’s participants). In Wadeye, Circumspection is the preference for not using personal names under conditions of taboo. Because Association prefers triangular reference forms and Circumspection prefers not names, the two preferences combine to make triangulations the most frequently chosen forms for use as avoidance recognitionals.

Perhaps because of the high incidence of taboo, there are lessons to be learnt from Murriny Patha conversation about recognitionals in general, particularly with regard to why recognitionals are to be understood as recognitional. Particularly illuminating are addressee-associated triangulations (e.g., your uncle), where the referent is associated to an addressed recipient. These forms make first class recognitionals because they make it obvious that the addressee is expected to recognize who is being spoken about. Such forms explicate a supposed prior knowledge association of the referent to the addressee. Furthermore, it is a supposed prior knowledge association of the referent to the addressee that actually underpins all recognitionals, except that for other types (e.g., names) the association is by implication.

In Chapter 9, I look at the use of prosodic reference in the reporting of prior speech. Prosodic reference is quite unlike anything described in the person reference literature. Within reported multiparty interaction, we find two varieties of prosodic reference: the “globally marked” and the “locally marked”. These referring strategies are used to indicate who was speaking in a reported prior conversation and sometimes, to whom. Each of these types of reference is suprasegmental, in that the domain of reference pertains to a higher level of linguistic structure than that of referential expressions. Even when reporting prior interaction, we still find that two of the conversational preferences discussed in the previous chapter (Specification and Minimisation) still apply within the prosodic domain. Globally marked and locally

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\(^3\) “Triangular” reference forms link the person being spoken about to some other person, e.g., John’s bank manager.
marked prosodic reference allow storytellers to maximize their referential specificity whilst minimizing the expressive means – saying more by using fewer words – a highly efficient referential strategy.

In Chapter 10, *Referring as an Interactional Achievement*, I propose an interactional model of the referential process. The model draws on interactional analyses of the conversational fragments contained in this dissertation. Before doing so, I address a few misconceptions about reference by outlining what sort of phenomenon we should take this process to be. Taking the famous turntaking paper as a model (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974), I begin by presenting eleven “grossly apparent facts” about referring in conversation. From there, I revisit the narrative encountered in Chapter 2, taking up its essential conundrum – how is it that speakers can use expressions to refer to *something*, without knowing what sort of *something* they are actually referring to? I deal with this conundrum by proposing that *referents* themselves need to be examined closely for what they are, namely different for both speakers and hearers. I thus propose two separate notions, *the speaker’s referent* and *the hearer’s referent*, each of which are conceptualizations of entities in the world.

The proposed model decomposes the referring process into nine distinct stages, each of which constitutes a task for either the speaker or the hearer. Each stage amounts to a point of potential failure where the process of referring can break down. I then reapply the model to some tricky fragments of conversation, so as to demonstrate how the process works. In particular, I examine a fragment of conversation where a speaker uses only pausal (i.e., several) and dual pronominal referencing to uniquely specify four individuals. Using only pronouns (and verbal cross-referencing) she firstly refers to a group, then to a pair, then to another slightly different pair. The model nicely accounts for the speaker’s ability to individuate, without ever referring to any of the individuals singularly. Then, after discussing a case of unsuccessful reference where the interlocutors begin to argue about different people with the same name, I finally propose a technical definition of how successful reference can be construed.

In sum, we can say that the story of referring is a story about people and what they do. The research is what it is, because what is presented comes from real naturally occurring talk that real Murrin Patha people were producing whilst interacting. If the findings are surprising, then they are so because people are
surprising. The story of referring in Murriny Patha conversation is certainly surprising, but it’s not for me to tell. Murriny Patha people are far better storytellers than I am. This is their story, and they certainly have some interesting contributions to make.