

To refer or not refer—Tracking's the question

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Abstract

In this paper I focus on **reference** and **identification** as two of the most fundamental processes in the domain of referential pragmatics, understood as the cognitive processing and linguistic interpretation of noun phrases. I argue that reference is about the problem of establishing a linguistic/cognitive framework for the collaborative tracking of a referent to support the accumulation of predicational information across multiple utterances in discourse.

Closely tied to the question of reference is the notion of **non-reference**, which acknowledges that nouns have other ways of making themselves useful to speakers than just referring. (For example, non-referential noun phrases can mimic verbs and adverbs in their capacity to contribute to the specification of event qualities.) I argue that non-reference is pervasive in language use, and must be understood in order for progress to be made in understanding reference, as well as identification.

The establishment of referentiality serves as prelude to the task of **identification**. Rather than being about locating a unique entity in the world corresponding to a given noun phrase, identification is about the problem of establishing a link between the current nominal referring expression and an independently existing cognitive file, as intended by the speaker for the purpose of collaborating with the hearer in the accumulation of predicational information.

I will also briefly situate reference and identification in relation to **recognition**, which I maintain must be distinguished as a separate inferential process of general cognition which, although it may draw on information gained through language, is relatively independent of the specific details of linguistic form. Recognition is a process which seeks to establish links between the cognitive files derived from the linguistic processing of referential pragmatics, on the one hand, and the modeling of knowledge and beliefs about entities in the interpreter's lifeworld, on the other.

Updating my earlier Cognitive File theory of definiteness (Du Bois 1980), I will introduce the concept of the **Distributed Cognitive File**, arguing that it is an important component of an effective theory of the process of referring, identifying, and accumulating predicational information about referents. The Distributed Cognitive File is part of the larger picture of Dialogically Distributed Cognition (Du Bois 2007, forthcoming; cf. Hutchins), which seeks to understand how co-participants coordinate their cognitive processes in order to jointly construct a body of mutual knowledge, establishing the sociocognitive relation of intersubjectivity.

The arguments will be illustrated with extensive examples drawn from naturally occurring language use, especially conversations in the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (Du Bois et al. 2000-2005).