“SOME ARTIST GUY”: THE ROLE OF SALIENCE AND COMMON GROUND IN THE FORMULATION OF REFERRING EXPRESSIONS IN CONVERSATIONAL NARRATIVES

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1. Introduction

Interacts use a variety of linguistic expressions such as pronouns, names, and noun phrases of varying complexity to refer to people, places, things, and other entities. Previous studies have usually accounted for the choice of these expressions on a textual basis (e.g., by talking about anaphoric coreference with referring expressions elsewhere in the text). Such studies try to account for the reader’s or listener’s ability to figure out the intended referent on the basis of the available linguistic cues. There are also studies that take as a starting point specific individual referring expressions, such as pronouns or definite noun phrases, and try to categorise all their different uses.

In the present paper, we adopt a different perspective. We argue that an account must be based on the cognitive and interactional processes of the partners, that is, on their estimations of their common ground and on their judgements about the accessibility of referents for their partners. We want to explore the ways in which speakers design referring expressions in an attempt to help hearers create appropriate mental representations with regard to both common ground and saliency. We will identify some of the ways in which speakers formulate referring expressions so as to build on common ground (Smith and Jucker 1998) and some of the ways in which they provide cues regarding the discourse salience of an entity.

Many previous studies have relied on intuited data or data elicited with questionnaires. Other studies have used journalistic or fictional texts. We are more interested in what happens in realistic spoken interactions. Our data, therefore, consists of informal narratives and conversations from pairs of California students. Partners watched the first half of a silent movie by Charlie Chaplin, and then one person saw the rest alone. Afterwards he or she told the partner the contents of the second half (cf. Klein and Perdue 1992), and both partners then discussed the movie. Even though these interactions were elicited in a research context, we believe that they are reasonably natural. The situation that a person tells another person the contents of a film or part of a film also occurs in real life. The more traditional research tools, as for instance questionnaires, on the other hand, elicit speakers’ intuition about language rather than natural language itself. Our recorded interactions are still somewhat less than entirely natural because they were elicited in a research context rather than being naturally occurring and spontaneous. But, compared to completely spontaneous conversations, they have the advantage that the interactants talk about a finite world of discourse entities (cf. Chafe 1980). We as researchers know precisely who or what the interactants are referring to. Moreover we can clearly distinguish between discourse entities that are common ground for the interactants because they are introduced in the first half of the movie, and discourse entities that are not common ground because they only occur in the second half of the movie. We also know the role of each entity in the overall plot.

We will start this paper by a brief review of some of the relevant literature against which we develop our own approach. This will be followed by a detailed data analysis in which we propose the following four claims. First, speakers acknowledge the saliency and common ground established during the first half of the movie by selecting referring expressions that preserve a high level of accessibility (cf. Ariel 1988) to introduce major entities into the narrative. Salient and familiar characters or objects are almost invariably introduced with a definite or possessive noun phrase. Even more striking, the central character of the movie (Chaplin) is typically referred to simply as he from the beginning. Second, speakers frequently introduce new entities by means of familiar frames. These frames are introduced with indefinite noun phrases (a restaurant), which in turn license the use of definite expressions to introduce concepts accessible in this frame (the waiter, the bill). In other cases, frames that are assumed but never introduced (the movie producers) also appear to license the use of definite expressions to introduce new entities. Third, speakers use distinctive strategies to introduce referents of moderate salience (e.g., this other guy, some other guy in the restaurant). In some cases, these are characters first introduced on the basis of a frame but who then need to be individuated in order to serve a larger role. And fourth, speakers frequently use unspecified pronouns to introduce characters who remain in the background and who serve only as props for the story. The pronoun they often refers to a group of people relevant to the story but who need not be precisely identifiable, e.g., crew members on the boat, passengers or, more vaguely, people connected with the production of the film or even of silent movies in general ("it is amazing at that time what they accomplished.") Similarly, an unspecified ‘he’ is often used to refer to characters who do not need to be individuated.

2. Theoretical background

Many studies adopt a semasiological point of view, that is to say they start from the linguistic expressions and investigate their uses. The central question for such studies is the use of the definite article, the use of definite referring expressions, the use of definite nominals or more generally the different functions of definiteness (e.g.

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Other studies focus on the interpretation process that is set off by a given referring expression. In particular they investigate which referring expressions are interpreted as coreferent with a preceding referring expression and which receive a disjoint reading (e.g. Ariel 1988, 1991, 1996; Chafe 1996; Levinson 1987a, 1987b, 1991; and Matsui 1998, in press).

Levinson, for instance, tries to predict coreferent versus disjoint readings of various noun phrases on the basis of pragmatic principles. His main claim is that “the more ‘minimal’ the form, the stronger the preference for a coreferential reading” (1987a: 384). He argues that lexical noun phrases are more informative than pronouns and pronouns are more informative than zeros, and accordingly zeros are most likely to receive a coreferential interpretation while null lexical NPs are most likely to receive a disjoint interpretation. But Ariel (1996: 17) quite correctly points out that naturally occurring data is more complicated. According to her the speaker does not choose a referring expression on the basis of its coreferentiality or disjointness but – crucially – on the basis of its accessibility for the addressee.

Speakers, according to Accessibility Theory, choose their referring expressions by taking into consideration the degree of accessibility of the mental entity for the addressee (as best they can assess it) (Ariel 1996: 20).

On the basis of three coding principles Ariel establishes an accessibility marking scale. The three principles are the principles of Informativity, Rigidity and Attenuation. According to the principle of Informativity zero expressions are least informative. Pronouns are somewhat more informative. Short noun phrases and longer expressions are increasingly more informative. The principle of Rigidity distinguishes between more rigid first and second person pronouns and less rigid third person pronouns; and it distinguishes between more rigid names and less rigid definite descriptions. The principle of Attenuation, finally, distinguishes between forms that differ in their phonological size, without differing in their informativity, that is to say stressed versus unstressed pronouns. On this basis she proposes the following accessibility marking scale:

zero < reflexives < agreement markers < cliticized pronouns < unstressed pronouns < stressed pronouns < stressed pronouns + gesture < proximal demonstrative (+NP) < distal demonstrative (+NP) + modifier < first name < last name < short definite description < long definite description < full name + modifier (Ariel 1996: 21)

Two factors influence the accessibility of the mental entity which serves as the antecedent: First, the saliency of the mental entity, and second, the distance between the last mention of the potential antecedent and the putative anaphoric expression. Some entities are inherently more salient, such as the speaker, the hearer, sentence topics and discourse topics, and in general human and animate objects. Entities that have to compete with other entities as potential antecedents are less salient. While it may be presumed that common ground plays a role in the saliency of an entity, Ariel’s model does not directly include this feature.

Previous researchers have also attempted to describe how different types of characters are comprehended from texts. Garrod, Sanford, and Moxey (Garrod 1995; Sanford and Moxey 1995) propose that readers must distinguish between primary characters (those in “explicit focus”) and frame-based characters that serve as props (those in “implicit focus”). Their model, called the Focus Framework, deals with the creation of mental referents by readers. In their argumentation the reader is presented with characters interacting in various situations and has to keep track of both the characters and the situations. They postulate the concepts of explicit focus and implicit focus to account for the work that readers have to do to keep track of discourse referents. The term “explicit focus” coincides largely with the term “foreground” as used by other researchers. The explicit focus contains the relevant discourse entities, it distinguishes between different specific characters or entities, i.e. it is entity or character individuating. The implicit focus, on the other hand, (which is perhaps less clearly synonymous with the term “background”) contains the currently relevant frames or scenarios. It is not character individuating but role or type individuating. Their argumentation is mainly based on experimental work. They measure reading times for critical sentences which contain referring expressions that refer to discourse entities that – according to their framework – should be more or less easily accessible for the listener.

Our viewpoint is onomasiological; that is to say we start from the interactional tasks of the speakers and try to establish the linguistic means that speakers use to achieve their goals. The speaker must somehow lead the hearer to an appropriate mental representation of events and ideas while maintaining the pace of the conversation. Two of the challenges faced by the speaker are to guide the hearer in identifying the common ground needed to interpret referring expressions and to guide him in establishing an appropriate level of accessibility of the referent.

We have argued elsewhere that understanding a referring expression is always based on relating it to some previously established context or common ground (Smith and Jucker 1998). It is easiest to notice this when the common ground is textually based, as in anaphoric reference expressions. However, the common ground may also be based on shared experience (such as the section of the video watched together) or on presumed background knowledge (such as the restaurant frame or the making of movies). The speaker must find ways to evoke the appropriate common ground and also to monitor whether it has been accessed. Thus we view the partners as negotiating their common ground.

In addition, the speaker must take into account the limited processing resources of the hearer. The hearer is not capable of paying unlimited attention to all referents, nor can he keep all of them accessible throughout an entire discourse event. Thus the speaker must provide cues that help him select which ones will receive the most attention at any given point and also which ones will need to be kept accessible and for how long. That is, the speakers’ referring expressions must provide cues as to the salience of each referent.

Our analyses build on work by others that distinguish between foregrounded and backgrounded entities. However, in contrast to earlier researchers, we propose not a dichotomy but rather a scale of salience. The Garrod, Sanford, and Moxey model of comprehension assumes that speakers will distinguish two types of entities,
foregrounded and backgrounded. Redeker’s (1987) analyses also distinguished between two levels, but in her model the distinction was between two levels of salience within foregrounded entities, primary and secondary characters. We find that we need to distinguish at least three different levels. Speakers introduce discourse entities which play an important role in the discourse, others that play a supporting role, and others that could be said to play the role of stage props. We wish to use the term “salience” to refer to this scale of importance within the discourse. Highly salient entities are those that are at the centre of attention, those that the conversationalists talk about and whose existence they take for granted. They play a role in the overall plot and thus must remain accessible at all times. Secondary entities are those whose existence is critical to a subplot. They need to be introduced and individuated for the sake of the narrative, and they need to remain accessible until the subplot is resolved. The stage props are background entities. They are needed only temporarily and with only general characteristics, to serve as background for the unfolding story. We also propose a relation between salience and specificity of the referring expression. That is, entities are made more salient by individuation, that is, by specificity in characteristics and actions. Yet such individuation requires more processing effort. Thus the speaker must manage the individuation of characters or objects in accord with their role in the discourse. Central characters must be given the greatest amount of individuation, while props may require no more than is provided by a frame. In our analyses, salience plays a somewhat different role than it does in Ariel’s model. She takes the salience of a referent to be the explanation for its identifiability by the hearer. Inherently salient referents, such as the speaker, the addressee, sentence topics and discourse topics, are more easily identifiable than non-salient referents. Our model proposes that speakers provide cues as to the salience of entities when they introduce them. We assume that speakers introduce a variety of referents into their discourse or their narrative. Some referents are important for the narrative. They are presented as salient, and the speaker deems it important that the addressee know that this referent will play an important role in the discourse. The speaker tries to ensure that the hearer has a clear mental representation of the intended referent and his or her attributes and goals. Other referents are presented as less salient. They are minor characters in the discourse or the narrative, who may need to be accessible for only part of the story. Finally, some entities may be just stage props. A very vague and fuzzy mental representation suffices for such referents. In fact, spending more time and energy on individuating a discourse entity would suggest to the listener that this entity has or will assume an important role in the discourse. We argue that the speaker’s judgment regarding the appropriate level of specificity is an important dimension which has a bearing on the choice of referring expression that is used for the introduction and the subsequent mentions of individual referents.

3. Data analysis

In the following we will substantiate our framework on the basis of our data consisting of recordings of pairs of students who participated in our experiments. We asked each

pair to watch a silent Charlie Chaplin movie (The Immigrant, 1917), see Redeker 1986, 1987 for a similar experiment). The movie lasts twenty-four minutes and tells the story of how the Charlie Chaplin character as an immigrant travels on an ocean liner to the United States. On the voyage he befriends a beautiful young woman who is travelling with her mother. The first part of the movie ends with the arrival of the boat in New York. At this point we asked one of the participants to leave the room and let the other watch the rest of the movie on his or her own. The second half begins with the disembarkation and separation of Chaplin from the young woman and her mother. The main scene of the second half is a restaurant, where Chaplin by chance meets the young lady again. In front of the restaurant he had found a coin with which he was going to pay for his own and her meal, but without noticing it he had immediately lost it, which means that he will not be able to pay for the bill. The pair is rescued by another diner in the restaurant, a rich artist, who takes a keen interest in them and offers them employment. In the end, they leave the restaurant and Chaplin drags the somewhat reluctant young lady into a marriage licence office.

The participants who have to leave the movie after the first part are asked to tell the contents of what they have seen so far as if they were telling it to a friend on the answer phone. Their partners, who watch the entire movie are then asked to tell the first participant the rest of the film.

The major characters, i.e. Charlie Chaplin and the young lady, are present prominently in both parts of the film. They are, therefore, part of the common ground of the two participants. The characters who only appear in the second part of the movie, on the other hand, are clearly not part of their common ground. They have to be introduced by the narrator. In particular there are six waiters, the artist, and several other diners who play a role in the second part. In addition, narrators often refer to inanimate entities. From the first part of the movie there is the boat that is often referred to. This is clearly a salient feature of the movie and therefore also part of the common ground of the two participants. Several inanimate entities become important in the second part, such as the coin, one of the tables in the restaurant and the bill.

The data used for this analysis consists of 11 (9 all-native, 1 ESL with near-native skills, and 1 mixed pair (A=EFIL, B=native)) recordings of pairs of students. For most claims only the dialogue recordings were analysed. Participant A is the one who only watches the first half of the movie. Participant B watches the entire movie and afterwards tells participant A what happened in the second part.

3.1. Introduction of salient entities that are presumed common ground

Salient entities from the first half of the movie can be presumed to be common ground. As would be expected, they are almost invariably introduced with a definite or possessive NP. This includes both characters (the young woman) and settings (the boat). These expressions encode the assumption that the hearer will be able to readily identify which woman or which boat is intended.

Speakers apparently have even more confidence that the hearer will have continuous access to the central character, as played by Chaplin. On the very first time this

2 We thank Kino’s International for their kind permission to use this video.
character is mentioned in conversation between the partners, he typically is referred to as he. Over two-thirds (7) of the speakers introduce him with a pronoun, he or him depending on the syntactic construction in which it occurs. The remaining speakers (4) introduce him by name, Charlie Chaplin, which also assumes a high degree of accessibility (cf. Ariel).

The other character who is central to the overall plot is the young woman who attracts Chaplin’s attention on the boat. She does not have as much screen time as some other characters, but in the genre of romantic comedies, one might anticipate that an attractive young woman will play an important role. Indeed, she reappears as the romantic interest and has to be introduced in the middle of the narrative of the second half. The speaker can assume that the addressee is familiar with this character from the first half, and all but one speaker used a definite referring expression (the woman) or a demonstrative (that girl) to introduce her. That is, they assume some degree of accessibility. However, many participants found it important to point out that the woman whom he met in the restaurant was the same woman as the one whom he had befriended on the boat, thus ensuring that the hearer would consult the previously established common ground. Seven participants use a descriptive noun phrase, such as that girl who he saw on the boat or the woman from the boat. Several participants appeal explicitly to the addressee’s knowledge of this referent: that girl, you know that woman or the girl you know from the boat. Two participants introduced her with a definite noun phrase without any descriptive modification, e.g. the girl or the lady, apparently assuming ready access to the correct referent.

In the first part of the movie, the young woman travels with her mother, but in the second part she is alone when Chaplin meets her. Nevertheless most narrators refer to the young woman’s mother in one way or another, and they almost invariably do it with a possessive noun phrase her mother. That is, a less salient character is introduced in terms of her relation to a more salient one.

The ocean liner of the first part of the movie is invariably referred to with a definite noun phrase, the boat or the ship. The boat is of course a salient entity from the first half. Narrators can take it for granted that their addresses remember the referent, but in contrast to the young woman, the boat is a background entity. It does not play an active role in the movie, and it does not occur after the disembarkation scene at the very beginning of the second part. Yet it continues to play an important role in that it provides a continuing reference point for introducing characters from that setting. It is frequently used to identify characters from the first half, as in the girl that was on the boat.

3.2. Use of frames in introducing new entities and maintaining props

Familiar frames often provide the common ground for the introduction of new referents. In the typical case, speakers introduce frames explicitly with indefinite noun phrases (a restaurant), which in turn license the use of definite expressions to introduce concepts accessible in this frame (the waiter, the bill). Frames may also be used implicitly, when the speaker assumes a frame as the basis for some feature of the situation.

The narrators in our data invariably introduce the restaurant and then rely on the restaurant frame to license the reference to several characters or objects that can be taken for granted in the context of a restaurant. This phenomenon is called indirect anaphora or bridging in the relevant literature (e.g. Epstein 1999, Matsui 1998, 2000). In nine cases in our data, the restaurant is introduced with an indefinite noun phrase. Once it is introduced with a definite noun phrase and once with a demonstrative noun phrase, this restaurant.

There are six waiters in the restaurant. Three of them are identifiable as individuals: the manager, a small waiter and a big waiter. The big waiter is the most important one, because he serves Chaplin and the young lady. The waiters act both as a group (when they evict a customer who is a dime short on his bill) and two of them become important as individuals because they interact with the main characters. The narrators rarely distinguished between different waiters. Either they did not notice that two different waiters were involved or, more likely, they did not deem it to be important to distinguish them. In fact, the two waiters are physically very different. One is very tall and stumpy with a stern looking face. The other waiter, who interacts only briefly with Chaplin, is small and slender. The two waiters never interact among each other and they only appear on screen together within the group of six waiters. Thus there appears to be no need to differentiate them and, accordingly, the narrators refer to either of them just as the waiter. Eight narrators introduce the waiter with a definite noun phrase; one with an indefinite noun phrase, and one with a demonstrative noun phrase, then there’s this waiter. One speaker does not mention any waiter at all.

It is part of our understanding of what a restaurant is that we take it for granted that there are tables and chairs for the customers. Almost all narrators refer to one of the tables in the restaurant in the course of their narration. In some cases this is Chaplin’s table, in other cases it is one of the other tables. Narrators usually refer to other tables as a reference point in introducing other characters. Chaplin’s table is three times introduced with a definite noun phrase and once with an indefinite noun phrase, while the other tables are introduced with the indefinite noun phrases another table (2), another guy’s table (2) and a table in front of them (1).

It is interesting that there are also characters in the movie who are never mentioned in any of the narratives. In particular two musicians can frequently be seen in the restaurant. However, they do not play an active role in the development of the story and are therefore ignored by the narrators.

As will be seen below, speakers sometimes evoke implicit frames. For example, speakers assume that movies must have had writers, producers, etc. Such assumed agents may be referred to without any prior introduction.

3.3. Introduction of referents that need to be individuated to a moderate degree

As with most stories, there were characters that played a supporting role, that is they played an active role in one or more episodes but were not critical to the overall plot. Under this category we only want to look at referents that are not completely predictable on the basis of the restaurant frame, that is to say we do not include the manager of the restaurant, the waiters, or other customers when they are playing only the roles given by the frame. However, certain of the customers and waiters must be differentiated from those who serve only as props.
Several diners in the restaurant become important in the narrative. There is a fellow diner who at first sits next to Chaplin and becomes exasperated by Chaplin’s way of eating beans. There is another customer who is ten cents short on his bill and as a result is beaten up by the manager and the waiters. There is a wealthy artist who rescues Chaplin and the young woman when Chaplin cannot pay the bill, and he also offers to employ both of them. The artist is critical to a major subplot, and all narrators include him in their accounts. The other characters do not play as important a role, and they are not mentioned by all the narrators.

There is no single and obvious way in which these characters are introduced into the narrative. According to the textbooks one might expect that they would be first mentioned in the form of an indefinite noun phrase. This is true for only six out of 32 cases of first mentions. More common forms are demonstrative noun phrases (12 cases) and noun phrases with the assertive determiner some (nine cases). The remaining instances are definite noun phrases (three cases) or indefinite noun phrases with the stressed article one (two cases). Relevant examples are shown in the following extracts (transcription conventions follow Du Bois 1991).

In extracts (1), (2), and (3), speakers introduce the customer who is ten cents short on his bill. He needs to be individuated to play a role in one scene, but he will not play a further role. In extracts (1) and (2), he is introduced with an indefinite noun phrase. In (1) it is unstressed and embedded in a possessive noun phrase. In (2) the indefinite article is stressed.

(1) B: and er... 
...so then the waiter...er goes over to another guy’s table, and he starts beating up this guy. 
and then like all waiters start beating up this guy, and... (pair no 6)

(2) 
...oh one guy, one guy across the way, 
erm...went to leave, but he paid his-- when he paid his bill he was ten cents short. ...so they beat him up. (pair no 22)

Extract (3) uses a proximal demonstrative noun phrase, this guy. Givon (1995) found that this expression is used only when a character or object will be maintained over several subsequent mentions. In this case, the speaker elaborated on this scene more than did other narrators. The expression this guy eued the hearer to keep the character accessible for a while.

(3) B: and there was this...guy who was er & s sitting at a table in front of them? not directly in the front but...in the front. (H)...and he didn’t have any money to pay his bill. (pair no 10)

The introduction of the artist character poses quite a challenge to the Speaker. He first appears as another customer, but then he comes to be more and more important. In extracts (4) and (5) the assertive determiner some is used to introduce the artist. Extract (4) is particularly interesting because here the speaker begins by introducing him as an undifferentiated customer, but she then repairs her utterance and replaces some other guy by this other like hefty guy or something. This is typical of introductions of this character. Speakers frequently used self-repairs to upgrade the status of this character.

(4) and like as they’re talking or something, 
some other guy...comes in-- 
this other like hefty guy or something comes over & & and sits by ‘em, & he’s like an artist or somethin’. (pair no 8)

Extract (5) uses the vague expression some plus an individuating title artist guy to provide some salience for the character. The expressions some and guy frequently appeared in introductions of characters with moderate degrees of salience. They seem to imply that there is much less unspecified about the character.

(5) THEN...some artist guy came, 
and sat er...sat next to them, 
and started talking about-- 
... (H) I guess maybe doing something with art with him, or something. (pair no 1)

Extracts (6) and (7) illustrate again the use of this to introduce a character of moderate salience (cf. Givon 1995). In both cases, the title artist is also used, though at different places in the introduction.

(6) B: (H) so then he doesn’t know what he’s gonna do, and then this artist is sitting over in another table, sees the two of them. (pair no 2)

(7) and he’s like <Q I’m not ready to pay Q> , 
<Q I’m not ready to pay yet Q> so then...this guy comes over and sits down, and I first I thought he was like totally praising him, like going who you are, but then later he said oh I’m an artist. (pair no 4)

Finally, one of the waiters comes to play a more salient role. Speakers typically first mention him with a frame-based definite reference, but they then go on, as in extract (8), to elaborate in some way so as to make him more salient.

(8) B: the waiter came over and the waiter was this really big guy, and...you know like a bouncer sort of thing, and... (H) arm...told him...erm...kept trying to get him to take his hat off, (pair no 22)
3.4. *Use of unspecified pronouns to introduce generic characters*

An unexpected feature of the narratives is the frequency with which pronouns are linguistically undetermined, that is, are used without prior introduction of the referent. Further, there is no evidence that this poses a problem for the hearer. Rather, as we shall see, these pronouns are interpreted in the context of the frames that have been established or that are generally assumed. Thus, for example, the pronoun *they* serves many roles, often referring to a group of people relevant to the story but who need not be precisely identifiable, e.g., crew members on the boat, or, more vaguely, referring to people connected with the production of silent movies in general (“it is amazing at that time what they accomplished.”)

Throughout the narratives, many referring expressions are linguistically undetermined. The pronouns *they or he* ordinarily have more than one potential referent. This can be shown by cases in which *they* is used several times in sequence with different referents without any intervening noun phrases that would clarify the changing reference. It can also be shown by cases in which *he* could potentially refer to a referent that was referred by a noun phrase more recently than the actually intended referent. In some cases, the pronoun *they* can be linguistically recoverable. In these cases it refers to a specified and identifiable group of people. But often it is only pragmatically recoverable. In this case it can either refer to a specified and identifiable group of people from earlier in the text. It can also refer to an unspecified group of people who are frame licensed and who play only a generic role. For example, it is used to refer to the waiters in a restaurant when acting as a group or to the film producers in connection with the creation of the movie. But it can also refer to non-recoverable but unimportant groups of people such as the immigration officials. (*They let Charlie Chaplin through the gate.* There is no chance that the addressee can identify the actual group of people who let the immigrants into the country. But it is also important. Here *they* stands for “somebody of relevance to the situation”. In more formal types of English, this might correspond to an agent-less passive (Charlie Chaplin was let through the gate). Consider, for example, extract (9).

(9) B: OK, so after you left,
   A: um huh,
   B: *they*(1) reach Ellis Island,
   A: *they*(2) [[door shuts]]--
   B: *they*(2) --
   A: *they*(2) --
   B: *they*(2) --
   A: [uh huh],
   B: *they*(1) reach Ellis Island,
   A: *they*(2) let Charlie Chaplin through the gate, but everybody else had to stay,
   B: *they*(3) flash you know -- all cold ans you know no & money or something like that,
   A: he doesn't have any money,
   B: *they*(3) flash you know -- all cold ans you know no & money or something like that,
   A: cause he gave his money away right?
   B: um huh,
by a definite noun phrase with a descriptive phrase (cataphoric reference) Charlie Chaplin, the girl from the boat, the girl he met on the boat, her mother, the boat. The less salient entities are generally introduced by an introductory phrase (there was this artist guy), by a demonstrative noun phrase (he found this coin) or by an indefinite noun phrase (a restaurant). The stage props, finally, are taken for granted. They are not introduced but are just used. Linguistically they are licensed through frames that were introduced on one of the higher levels (the restaurant frame: the waiter, they, the manager, the table, the bill; Charlie Chaplin: the cane; the film and the shooting of the film: actors, producers, they).

Three main points have emerged from our analysis. First, the choice of a specific referring expression depends crucially on the salience of the referent. The form chosen by the speaker gives the addressee specific indications as to how important the referent will be for the purposes of the conversation. Major characters are treated differently from minor characters, from frame-induced entities and from entities that are merely props. Second, our framework differs from traditional accounts in that we believe that the mental representations that are created through referring expressions often do not need to be very precise. In fact, an unnecessarily precise referring expression would incur unwarranted processing effort on part of the addressee and it would suggest an inappropriate level of discourse salience. Thus fuzziness and vagueness in referring expressions turn out to be highly functional and efficient. Finally, referring expressions reflect the amount and nature of presumed common ground. Speakers formulate expressions for previously established referents that reflect the presumed accessibility of those entities. When introducing new referents, they frequently rely on frames or on relations to entities that have already been established.

References

DIMENSIONAL DESIGNATION: A CASE STUDY IN LEXICAL PRAGMATICS

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1. Introduction

Lexical Pragmatics is a particular account of the division of labour between lexical semantics and pragmatics (e.g. Blutner 1998). It combines the idea of (radical) semantic underspecification in the lexicon with a theory of pragmatic strengthening (based on conversational implicatures). In the core of this approach is a precise treatment of Atlas & Levinson's 1981 Q- and I-principles and the formalization of the balance between informativeness and efficiency in natural language processing (Horn's 1984 division of pragmatic labour). In a roughly simplified formulation, the I-principle seeks to select the most coherent interpretation, and the Q-principle acts as a blocking mechanism which blocks all the outputs which can be grasped more economically by an alternative linguistic input. Recently, these mechanisms have been implemented within a bidirectional version of optimality theory (OT) which aims to integrate expressive and interpretive optimization (Blutner 1999).

The aim of this paper is to apply this framework to resolve some puzzles of dimensional designation of spatial objects. The term 'dimensional designation' refers to the contextual interpretation of a group of spatial adjectives such as long, high, broad, deep, thick and can be illustrated by the following example:

(1) a. The window sill is 1 m long, 30 cm wide and 3 cm thick
b. The window sill is 1 m wide, 30 cm deep and 3 cm thick

In (1a) the adjective wide refers to the secondary dimension whereas in (1b) it refers to the maximal (most salient) dimension. In order to explain the basic effects of dimensional designation we need the right combination of lexical stipulations and general principles of coherence, blocking and (perhaps) deblocking. In the following, we want to illustrate how bidirectional OT solves this conceptual and methodological problem.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces the bidirectional optimality framework and illustrates how the Greicean framework of conversational implicature can be reformulated by means of this technique. In section 3 some puzzles of dimensional designation of spatial objects are outlined. Finally, in section 4 the bidirectional optimality