

The grammar of the essential indexical[☆]

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Abstract

Like proper names, demonstratives, and definite descriptions, pronouns have referential uses. These can be 'essentially indexical' in the sense that they cannot be replaced by non-pronominal forms of reference. Here we show that the grammar of pronouns in such occurrences is systematically different from that of other referential expressions, in a way that illuminates the differences in reference in question. We specifically illustrate, in the domain of Romance clitics and pronouns, a hierarchy of referentiality, as related to the topology of the grammatical phase. Our explanation is based on extending the 'Topological Mapping Hypotheses' of Longobardi (2005) and Sheehan and Hinzen (2011). The extended topology covers the full range of interpretations, from purely predicative to quantificational (scope-bearing), to referential and deictic. Along this scale, grammatical complexity increases, and none of these forms of reference is lexical. This provides evidence for the foundational conclusion that the source of essential indexicality is grammatical rather than lexical, semantic or pragmatic.

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1. Introduction

A lexical item like 'man' cannot as such refer to this man or that, some men, men in general, the property of being a man, manhood, or mankind: *phrases*, in particular grammatical configurations, are required to achieve any of these effects. Thus, while 'man' is a lexical item, 'the man' is not, and it's the latter that can be used to refer to a specific man, as in 'Give the man a dollar' or 'The man I met this morning was poor', while the former can as such not be so used. Referentiality falls on the side of grammar, not the lexicon, in this sense.¹ Moreover, the phrase 'the man' need not be so used, as when the grammar of its occurrence is different, showing that reference is not strictly a *phrasal* notion either

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¹ In this, our approach is in line with *exoskeletal* approaches to language (like e.g. *Distributed Morphology* or *Nanosyntax*) which also militate against the *lexicocentrist* view, by relying on structure rather than the lexicon to obtain meaning (cf. Borer, 2005; Marantz, 2008; Starke, 2010; Boeckx, 2014).

and instead depends on phrases entering the right grammatical relations. Thus, in *'Whenever I interview a couple, the man is more silent'*, no definite man is denoted: there is a description, picking out a variable referent, but no definiteness.²

Reference is not a univocal notion, moreover: referentiality comes in different *forms*, and these *co-vary* with grammatical configurations. Thus, proper names, in their referential uses, are by now widely acknowledged to have referential properties different from those of definite descriptions in their referential uses. Definite descriptions in turn are different from indefinite descriptions, which cannot be used referentially at all, though they can be specific. Bare noun phrases that project no determiner can only refer generically (cf. *'He likes men'*) or to a mass (cf. *'He ate man'*, said about a cannibal, similar to *'He ate beef'*). Finally, noun phrases in grammatically predicative positions neither refer generically to objects nor to a mass/substance, having property readings instead (e.g. *'He is a man'*). The grammar of the nominal, reviewed below, is systematically different in each of these cases, showing that different forms of reference co-vary with grammatical configurations.

By contrast, *none* of these forms are lexical, and none are predicted from independent *semantic* considerations. Semantics, in the base sense of reference or 'relations to the world', makes no predictions for what forms of reference, if any, will exist in a given species: for all that reference, as a semantic base notion, predicts, reference in humans could be causally controlled – but it never is, pathologies aside, in the way it always is in other species, such as monkeys (Fitch, 2005). Instead, we find the same range of forms of reference in all human languages: from predicative to generic, indefinite, definite, rigid, deictic, and personal forms of reference, each with their inherent grammatical constraints.

In short, reference in humans takes a species-specific *format*, and the forms of reference that we find in this species are not found outside of language, in non-linguistic species: chimpanzees, in particular, do not even *point* (declaratively), in the way that normally developing human infants universally do around their first birthdays (Butterworth, 2003), let alone exhibiting the range of forms of reference above, which universally develop in humans in subsequent years. This motivates taking the perspective seriously that the forms of reference found in humans, and their inherent constraints, are mediated by the grammatical organization of language, given that they are not available lexically or pre-linguistically.

Classical support for this strategy comes from the research program of a 'grammar of reference' that Longobardi (1994, 2005) inaugurated for the forms of reference found in the nominal domain. Longobardi specifically argued that the grammar of proper names in their referential uses is systematically different from that of definite descriptions, in ways that Hinzen (2007:ch.5) argued explains the kind of 'rigidity' of reference (Kripke, 1980) found in proper names in these uses. We review this result in more detail below. Longobardi's mapping principles for the forms of reference targeted are 'topological' in the sense that it is the internal geometry of the DP and the clause of which it is a part, which determines the way in which it can be used to refer. Sheehan and Hinzen (2011) extended this topological mapping theory to clauses, and the forms of reference available there: a clause can pick out a proposition, a fact (in factives), or (in matrix contexts) a truth value, as reviewed below.

All of this leaves the case of pronouns open, which we target here. A long tradition in philosophy and semantics has already argued that referential uses of pronouns cannot be assimilated to either that of pronouns or definite descriptions: pronouns, it is said, in particular the personal ones, have 'essentially indexical' uses that cannot be assimilated to the use of either proper names or definite descriptions. Thus, for example, Frege's famous amnesiac, Dr. Lingens, who is lost in the Stanford library after closing hours and reads books about some academic called 'Lingens', can find himself in a situation where he knows everything there is to be known (from books) about Lingens, yet fails to grasp the proposition expressed by *'I am Lingens'* (Perry, 1993).

This paper takes this tradition as a starting point, aiming to extend the topological mapping theory even further, to the domain of pronouns in such essential indexical uses. The core evidence presented below supports the view that, in pronouns in these uses, the left edge of the nominal phase is extended further, in line with what extant results in topological mapping theory make us expect. We document this expansion below for the domain of Romance clitics and pronouns.

The evidence also suggests that essentially indexical forms of reference are grammatically or topologically also the most *complex*. This, if true, would naturally *explain* their essential indexicality: for if proper names and definite descriptions are, in a defined sense, (i) grammatically less complex, and (ii) the degree of this complexity systematically correlates with the forms of referentiality that we find, then (iii) it is reasonable to conclude that essential indexicals cannot be replaced by either proper names or definite descriptions for this very reason. The reason for the existence of essential indexicality would then be grammatical, not semantic or pragmatic.

² This suggests that the very notion of a 'definite description' is a misnomer: whether a phrase like 'the man' functions as a definite description can only be told by knowing its grammatical context. The exact same 'definite description' can be used referentially and attributively, and indeed in the very same clause: cf. *'I wished her husband wasn't her husband'* (Lycan, 2009), where the first occurrence is referential, the second is attributive, in line with the grammatically predicative role of the phrase in its second occurrence but not the first.

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