

The role of number of referents and animacy in children's use of pronouns

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Abstract

Recent research on referents' accessibility has provided new evidence for the role played by linguistic and non-linguistic information in the choice of referential expressions by adult speakers. Adults can construct complex mental representations of the discourse that integrate both linguistic and visual-perceptual cues; whether children do the same is not entirely clear.

Two story-telling experiments with English-speaking four-year-olds tested the hypothesis that children also choose referential expressions on the basis of discourse models that feature both linguistic and perceptual information. The findings show that children's use of pronouns to identify a previously mentioned referent was significantly affected by the number of referents that were linguistically mentioned and visually present in a scene, and by their animacy. The decreased use of pronouns in the absence of gender congruency strongly suggests that children were not motivated by ambiguity avoidance, but were affected by the degree of similarity interference between the target referent and the additional character.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Referential choice and similarity-based interference in adult language

Talking about events relies on the identification of referents through the choice of linguistic expressions, an operation that requires the speaker to integrate linguistic (syntactic, morphological, semantic, phonological, discourse-pragmatic) and non-linguistic (visual, perceptual) information to select the optimal referential expression. Because the relationship between referents and referential expressions is one-to-many, the speaker's choice will vary as a function of the accessibility of the referent; the more accessible the referent, the more reduced the referential expressions with minimally reduced expressions such as zero anaphora and unstressed pronouns at one end of the continuum, and definite Noun Phrases (NPs) at the other (see the Givenness Hierarchy in [Gundel et al., 1993](#)). Predictors of the accessibility of a referent have also been the focus of much scrutiny. Recency and frequency of mention, topichood, the referent's structural position in the preceding sentence, animacy, and potential competitors in the previous discourse have all been identified as determinants of a referent's accessibility. Due to the nature of the data, corpus studies, especially those of written language, have exclusively focused on the aforementioned linguistic variables determining the form of a referential expression, while a number of experimental studies have recently considered more closely the role played by perceptual

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variables in a speaker's choice of referential expression. If discourse representations include the physical environment in which language is produced, then non-linguistic factors, such as for example the visual availability of a referent, are going to play a crucial role in determining its accessibility.

A number of these studies (Arnold and Griffin, 2007; Fukumura and van Gompel, 2010; Fukumura et al., 2010, 2011) have specifically focused on the use of personal pronouns vs. proper names or lexical Noun Phrases (NPs) in contexts in which mention to a target referent is elicited in the presence of a competitor. The notion of competition has been formulated in terms of semantic similarity, i.e. on the basis of features or attributes that are shared between referents. The more features a target referent shares with one or several other referents, the more likely that competition will arise resulting in the reduced accessibility of the intended referent. This kind of similarity interference, and the reduced accessibility of the referent, has consequences for the referential choices made by the speaker. According to Fukumura and van Gompel (2010) speakers need to activate more information about an intended referent when its accessibility is low; the activation of more information will, in turn, lead to the production of more explicit referential expressions.

Three recent studies with adult speakers have considered the effect of linguistic and perceptual competitors on the choice of referential expressions in the framework of similarity-based interference. Two have specifically addressed the effect of the visual presence of a competitor (Arnold and Griffin, 2007; Fukumura et al., 2010), and one has focused on the role of animacy (Fukumura and van Gompel, 2010).

Using two story continuation tasks, Arnold and Griffin (2007) showed that previous linguistic mention of a referent significantly affected the speakers' chances of using a pronoun rather than a proper name to refer to a topic antecedent. Participants watched cartoons including one or two familiar characters of different gender and listened to sentences describing the scenes as in (1a) and (1b) below:

(1a) Mickey went for a walk with Daisy in the hills one day.

(1b) Mickey went for a walk in the hills one day.

Their task was to describe a second picture where the first-mentioned character (Mickey) appeared either on its own (conditions 1 and 2) or with the second-mentioned referent in the background (condition 3). The only significant difference was due to the manipulation of prior linguistic mention; participants used significantly more pronouns when there was only one linguistically mentioned antecedent as in (1b) than when there were two as in (1a). Whether the second-mentioned referent appeared in the second picture did not significantly affect the proportion of pronouns; participants were equally likely to repeat the proper name to identify the target referent in the second scene. Because the referents were always of different gender, the use of a personal pronoun, i.e. *he* or *she*, would have unambiguously identified the target referent even in the presence of another linguistically mentioned competitor, nevertheless speakers preferred to repeat the name of the character rather than using a pronoun. According to Arnold and Griffin (2007) the repetition of a proper name to refer to a highly accessible, recently mentioned, topic referent was not motivated by ambiguity avoidance and did not constitute an obvious communicative advantage from the listener's point of view. Their proposal was rather that it was the outcome of the competition between two similar (animate) entities in the speaker's mental model leading to the decreased activation of each entity. In this account the speaker-internal allocation of attention results in the reduced accessibility of the first-mentioned referent which, in turn, requires the more informative repetition of the character's proper name. The fact that no differences in pronoun use were found between the condition in which the second-mentioned referent reappeared in the scene to be described and the one in which it did not, suggests that competition between the two entities arises early in the speaker's mental model and persists to the point at which a referential expression must be produced. The visual presence of another character at the point at which participants had to start speaking was therefore not the locus of the processing difficulty because the visual competitor enters the discourse representation as soon as it is encountered.

Although Arnold and Griffin conclude that it was the linguistic mention of the second-mentioned character in the first panel, and not its visual presence in the second panel, that determined speakers' choices, they did not have a crucial additional condition to rule out that the visual presence of the competitor did independently affect referential choice. A further condition where the character was present in the first scene but not linguistically mentioned would have been necessary to tease apart the actual contribution of linguistic and perceptual information to referential choice in conditions of competition. This is precisely what Fukumura et al. (2010) tested in their study. In their first experiment they fully crossed two variables (linguistic mention of the competitor: mentioned/not mentioned), (presence of the competitor: present/not present) to create four conditions. The participants were presented with a scene and a written description that they had to read aloud (e.g. *The pirate's carpet had been cleaned by a prince*), they then had to describe a second picture showing the action performed by the target character (e.g. *The pirate fell down*) to a confederate of the experimenter who had to act it out in the absence of visual access to the second scene. Both the effect of linguistic mention and the presence of the competitor were significant, more pronouns were used when the competitor had not been mentioned and when it was not present. A marginally significant interaction between the two variables also showed that when the competitor was present more pronouns were used in the absence vs. the presence of linguistic mention.

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