

Choosing referring expressions in Belgian and Netherlandic Dutch: Effects of animacy



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Abstract

It has been argued that animate entities are referred to with more attenuated expressions than inanimate entities, because they are more accessible in memory. Two previously untested claims made for Dutch suggest that the situation may be more complex. Firstly, it has been stated that full pronouns can only refer to animate entities, while reduced pronouns can also refer to inanimate entities. This seems to be inconsistent with the accessibility account. Secondly, inanimate entities may be pronominalized less to avoid gender-marked expressions when grammatical gender is unclear. Using a sentence completion task, we tested these claims by investigating the effect of animacy on both the choice of pronouns versus more specific expressions and the choice of reduced versus full pronouns in Dutch. We compared speakers of Netherlandic Dutch, who have generally lost intuitions about masculine and feminine grammatical gender of nouns, with speakers of Belgian Dutch, for whom these intuitions are still relatively intact. Both groups showed an effect of animacy on pronominalization, suggesting that this effect cannot only be explained as a gender avoidance strategy. At the same time, the choice between full and reduced pronouns cannot be explained by accessibility. Implications for theories of reference production are discussed. © 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Among the many types of expressions that can be used to refer to an entity, pronouns encode the least information about the referent (leaving aside morphologically invisible ways of referring, such as the use of zero anaphora). Languages differ in the amount of information encoded in pronouns, but for the Germanic languages it generally holds that personal pronouns convey information about person, number, gender, and/or case. Given the general nature of these features, pronouns can be highly ambiguous in everyday language: They can refer to many different things. Therefore, the restricted informational content of pronouns requires that their referents somehow be salient, i.e., be in the focus of attention, to be correctly identified (e.g., [Ariel, 1990](#); [Givón, 1976](#); [Gundel et al., 1993](#)). Several discourse factors have been found to influence the salience of a referent, for instance whether it was the subject, the topic, or the first mentioned entity in the previous sentence (e.g., [Gernsbacher and Hargreaves, 1988](#); [Gordon et al., 1993](#); [Grosz et al., 1995](#)). In addition, the salience of a referent can also be influenced by its intrinsic properties, such as its animacy. Human referents may be inherently more salient than other animate referents (e.g., animals), which are in turn more salient than inanimate

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referents. The animacy hierarchy, given in (1), which was originally proposed as an implicational hierarchy to explain certain grammatical phenomena (e.g., [Comrie, 1989](#)), may therefore also be seen as a salience hierarchy.

- (1) *Animacy hierarchy*
Human > Animate > Inanimate

Indeed, many psycholinguistic studies have shown that human or animate referents are more likely to be placed in subject position, or to be mentioned earlier in the sentence, than inanimate referents (e.g., [Bock et al., 1992](#); [Bresnan et al., 2007](#); [Prat-Sala and Branigan, 2000](#); [Rosenbach, 2005](#); [Van Nice and Dietrich, 2003](#)). These effects are generally explained as conceptual accessibility effects. That is, mental representations of human or animate entities are more activated in memory and therefore more easily retrieved than those of inanimate entities ([Bock and Warren, 1985](#)). Crucially, if animacy affects the accessibility of a referent in memory, it is also expected to affect what type of referring expression is chosen to refer to that referent. It is generally assumed that more accessible referents are referred to with more attenuated referring expressions (e.g., [Ariel, 1990](#)). According to Ariel, referents with a low accessibility are preferred to be referred to with a full definite description; referents of intermediate accessibility can be realized with demonstrative pronouns, for example; and highly accessible referents are preferably referred to with unstressed, reduced pronouns or zero anaphora. This is expressed by the accessibility scale in (2). Mapping the animacy hierarchy in (1) on the accessibility scale in (2) results in the prediction that the more animate a conceptual representation of a referent is, the more attenuated the expression referring to that referent will be.

- (2) *Accessibility scale* (simplified version of the scale presented in [Ariel, 1990](#))
Zero > Reduced pronoun > Full pronoun > Proximate demonstrative > Distal demonstrative > Full NP

Indeed, in a corpus of Swedish texts, [Dahl and Fraurud \(1996\)](#) found that antecedents denoting humans were more than four times as likely to be referred to with pronouns as inanimate antecedents (as opposed to full noun phrases; see also [Yamamoto, 1999](#) for corpus data on English and Japanese). In a story completion experiment, [Fukumura and Van Gompel \(2011\)](#) found a similar, but weaker, tendency in the frequency of the English third person plural pronoun *they*, which was higher when participants referred to animate entities than when they referred to inanimate entities. Fukumura and Van Gompel argued that this effect was not due to the avoidance of the ambiguity that is inherent to pronouns, since the same effect was found in contexts in which a pronoun was not ambiguous. In addition, they found that the effect was independent of the grammatical function of the antecedent noun, suggesting that it cannot be explained as an effect of discourse salience. Fukumura and Van Gompel proposed that references to animate entities are more often attenuated than references to inanimate entities because human or animate referents are inherently more accessible in memory. Therefore, less information from the conceptual representation needs to be encoded in a referring expression to activate that representation.

The direct mapping of the animacy of the referent to the degree of attenuation in referring expressions is not unproblematic, however. Firstly, it has been claimed that in languages that have a distinct set of pronouns that are phonologically or morphologically reduced and cannot be stressed, these reduced forms can be used to refer to both animate and inanimate entities, while their full counterparts, which can be stressed, can only refer to animate (human) entities (e.g., [Cardinaletti and Starke, 1996](#)). This goes exactly counter to the idea that expressions referring to animates are more likely to be attenuated, since that would predict that reduced pronouns are more frequent in reference to animate entities than full pronouns. Secondly, in both English and Swedish, the languages investigated in the studies mentioned above, the relation between the animacy of the referent and the choice of a certain referring expression has been grammaticalized to some degree. For example, masculine and feminine pronouns in those two languages are used almost exclusively for animate (human) referents (e.g., [Corbett, 1991](#)). In English, the neuter pronoun *it* is used to refer to inanimate entities, and, when used anaphorically, English demonstrative pronouns, which do not have a gender distinction, often have antecedents that are not individuals (e.g. propositions or composite entities; [Brown-Schmidt et al., 2005](#)). In Swedish, the common gender pronoun *den* and the neuter pronoun *det* typically refer to non-human entities, as illustrated by the ungrammaticality of (3b) as opposed to (3a).

- (3) a. *Jag gick på Skyfall istället för på the Hobbit, eftersom jag tyckte att den_i verkade tråkig.*
I went to S instead of to TH because I thought that that/it seemed boring
'I went to see Skyfall instead of The Hobbit, because that one seemed boring.'
b. **Jag gick till Simon istället för till Hugo_i, eftersom jag tyckte att den_i verkade tråkig.*
I went to S instead of to H because I thought that that/it seemed boring

Hence, the tendency to use different types of referring expressions to refer to animate and inanimate entities may be influenced by the fact that some forms already encode animacy. This raises the question whether the effect of animacy on

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