On formulating reference: An interactional approach
to relative clauses in English conversation

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1.0 Introduction

The question of formulating reference to persons has been of interest to students of spoken discourse for some time. Various approaches have been taken to this question; see e.g. Du Bois, 1980; Fox, 1987a and 1987b; Duranti, 1984; Reichman, 1981; Grosz, 1976; Sacks and Schegloff, 1979; Linde, 1979; Clancy, 1980, Redecker, 1987.

Our concern in this paper is the role of relative clauses (in English conversation) in formulating reference. We will offer examples which suggest that, in addition to grammatical and informational considerations, certain facts about the use of relative clauses can be insightfully accounted for in interactional terms. That is, the primary goal of the paper is to enrich the ongoing project of functional syntax—which we take to be the illumination of the relationships between form and function in language—by including in function the creation/maintenance of social identities and relations between conversational participants, as well as other interactional issues.

1.1 The Data Base

The present study is part of a larger project on relative clauses in English conversation (see Fox and Thompson, 1990). This larger project examines the syntactic and distributional characteristics of 414 relative clauses; these relative clauses were culled from transcripts of naturally-occurring English conversations, recorded and transcribed by a variety of people, in different parts of the country, over a span of approximately 20 years. All of the participants in these conversations are native speakers of American English, as far as this can be determined. Many of the speakers have had at least some college education. Some of the conversations took place over the telephone, others are
face-to-face; many involve just two participants, but there are several with more than two.

1.2 Terminology

The term "x-relative" is used to refer to the role of the NP in the relative clause; thus object-relative refers to a relative clause in which the relativized-on NP is an object in the relative clause. The term "x-head" is used to refer to the role of the head NP in its main clause; thus object-head refers to a main clause in which the head noun is a direct object. For example, the following (invented) sentence is an object-head, subject-relative:

(i) I have a friend that acts like that

In this sentence, the noun phrase a friend is the object of the main clause (hence object-head), and it plays the role of subject in the relative clause (hence subject-relative).

2.0 Formulating reference

We begin our investigation of the interactional bases of the grammar of relative clauses by examining the choice of whether to use a relative clause at all, rather than an unmodified full noun phrase, or a noun phrase modified by an adjective.

It has been claimed that relative clauses help to specify the identity of the head-referent, and thereby serve a reference-tracking function. But reference-tracking itself, the constitution of participants in discourse, is a highly interactional process, because formulations of references to persons and things is one of the ways whereby speakers show their relationships to one another, to the topic being constructed, and to other people like them. This indexicality has been noticed by a number of researchers; Schegloff (1972) makes this point about deictic expressions in the context of conversation for the formulation of location:

... on each occasion in conversation on which a formulation of location is used, attention is exhibited to the particulars of the occasion. In selecting a "right" formulation, attention is exhibited to "where we know we are," to "who-we-know-we-are," to "what-we-are-doing-at-this-point-in-the-conversation." A "right" formulation exhibits,
in the very fact of its production, that it is some "this conversation, at this place, with these members, at this point in its course" that has been analyzed to select that term; it exhibits, in the very fact of its production, that it is some particular "this situation" that is producing it. (p.115--emphasis in the original)

To see how these statements relate to relative clauses, let’s examine a particular context, namely (1):

(1) (TG: 8)

B: This feller I have- (iv-) "felluh"; this ma:n.
(0.2) t!: hhh He ha::(s)- uff-eh-who-who I have for Linguistics // is really too much, .hh//h=
A: Mm hm?
A: Mm hm,

--- B: =I didn’t notice it but there’s a woman in my class who’s a nurse ‘n. .hh she said to me she said did you notice he has a ha:ndicap and I said wha:t. You know I said I don’t see anything wrong with him, she says his ha:nds.

As we have described elsewhere (Fox, 1987), "there’s a woman in my class who’s a nurse" introduces a new referent whose expertise as a nurse is used to establish the reason for an observation about an instructor (that he has a mild handicap, so mild in fact that only an "expert" could have detected it). But if her "nurseness" is the critical aspect of her description for this particular occasion, why did the speaker first introduce her as a woman, with the information about her being a nurse occurring as a modifier in a relative clause, rather than as a nurse in an ordinary simple existential: "there’s a nurse in my class"? The choice between these two formulations is finely tuned to the kinds of interactional issues raised by Schegloff in the passage above.

A cursory look at other transcripts indicates that the fact of the woman’s nurseness does not tell the entire story. Consider, for example, the following utterance, in which the noun nurse is used without modification and without being itself introduced in a relative clause:
It is our belief that the referent of nurse in (2) would be inappropriately formulated as the woman who’s a nurse; that is, that would be pragmatically bizarre to refer to such a person in the context of (2) as the woman who’s a nurse. Why, then, is the referent in (1) so formulated?

We believe that the choice between these two formulations has to do with the fact that in (2) the concept of nurse has been invoked by the surgery frame, while in (1) no such frame is active. And, as has been suggested in Fillmore (1977), Du Bois (1980), Tannen (1979), and Wertsch (1986), among others, frames, in addition to being matters of cognition and culture, are also matters of recipient design, to put it in Sacks’ (1972) terms. In fact, it is possible to provide a richer analysis of the reference formulations in (1) and (2) if we respond to the situated nature of these formulations.

In (1), the reference is complex. The speaker has been talking about her linguistics class and how awful the instructor of this class is. Now it is the case, as Sacks (1972) and Schegloff (1972) have shown, that reference formulation is sensitive to membership categorization, such that if a noun is used, let’s say for example ‘doctor’, then references to other people will be done to make their membership in the same or a related category (for example, ‘hospital’) transparent to the recipient.

For the context of classrooms, category membership can be displayed with nouns like instructor, student, or even
person or woman; "nurse" is not one of the members of the classroom category (unless there is a clinic in the room, or s/he is there to give a lecture on a medical topic, or to provide aid to someone in the class, etc.). That is, the woman in this utterance is not in the classroom as a nurse, but as a student. Her category-relevant formulation is thus not nurse, and there are no prior categories evoked whose use would make the reference formulation nurse transparent as a member of that category. Nonetheless, for the purposes of the story that B wants to tell, the woman is also relevantly a nurse, even though her "nurseness" has not been made a part of the context as it has been created to that point in the conversation. For this particular telling occasion, then, the woman has two identities -- as a person in the class, tied to the context of classroom roles, and as a nurse, tied to the context of detection of physical ailments.

Now note that this dual identity could not have been established without the resources of two formulations, which in this case are realized by: (1) the head noun, and (2) the relative clause. This example shows very clearly, then, how the interactional and cognitive consideritions underlying the notion of 'frame' can help us to understand why a relative clause might be used at all.

For example (2), on the other hand, the reference is more straightforward. The parties have been discussing V's father's surgery and her mother's reaction to it (and V's reaction to her mother's reaction). In hospitals (where surgery takes place) one finds people whose actions are made interpretable through roles like "nurse" and "doctor" and whose identities are made transparently members of the same category by nouns like doctor and nurse. One does not find people who are also nurses and doctors -- they are in the first place nurses and doctors (notice the oddness of telling someone about your experience in the hospital as "and then a guy who's a doctor comes in and takes my pulse").

So, yes, in fact it is the case that nurse is invoked by the surgery frame and not by the classroom frame, but that cannot be the full explanation for the formulations in (1) and (2). In order to see how the formulations relate to the frames, we need to be able to understand who the conversational parties are to one another on the occasion of the conversation, who the characters being spoken about are to one another, how the speakers feel about the characters being talked about, and how all of these interact. In the case of utterance (1) this means understanding: why B wants to characterize the woman as a nurse, if in fact the woman is not providing nursing services to the class; why she is relating this story about her instructor's handicap to begin with, why she and A are talking about school and their instructors, and ultimately what kind of relationship
the two of them are trying to create/maintain with this conversation. We do not have clearly worked out answers to these questions, but we suggest that they are all relevant to the use of the relative clause structure in the conversation.

We can come to this same perspective from another angle. Let us take as our starting point the findings presented in Fox and Thompson (1990), namely that the formulation chosen for a particular head noun interacts in important ways with the syntactic role chosen for that head noun in the main clause and for the role of that noun in the relative clause. For example, we found that formulations of the sort somebody, anybody -- what we will call recognition-non-relevant forms (Sacks, 1972) -- do not occur in our corpus in subject head role (as one might expect for noun phrases referring to humans), nor in existential head role, but rather in object head role; moreover, they tend to occur with subject-relatives rather than object-relatives. That is, utterances like (b) are more common than utterances like (a):

[invented examples]

(a) Someone that you like has been sitting here.

(b) She hates anybody that isn't Catholic.

On the other hand, formulations of the sort a woman (specific) tend to occur in existential head roles, with subject-relatives, while the definite phrase the lady may tend to co-occur with an object-relative.

Now we must acknowledge, as Schegloff (1972) does, that there are potentially an infinite number of ways to formulate reference to any given thing. I can refer to the same individual as a friend of mine, a colleague, someone at school, someone who lives downtown, a student of X's, the sister of a famous artist, the other woman in my department, Prof. Y, etc., infinitely multiplicable for different contexts. And the formulation chosen will, as we have shown above, to a certain degree co-articulate with a given syntactic structure. It is therefore of the utmost importance for the analysis of the syntactic behavior of relative clauses that we understand how and why a particular formulation of an entity is accomplished. And this is an intimately interactional matter.

A particularly striking example of the ways in which interactional issues inform the selection of formulations of reference is given below. In this passage, the formulation is done once for an adult, and then later, as a repair, for a child. The second formulation is done with the help of a relative clause:
(3)

(At dinner, A and D are married, J is B’s young son, Terry is J’s younger brother)

B: So how’s Karen ‘n everybody doin? I m- I meant to tell them to like, send her our regards ‘n all that, it’s been a long time since we’ve seen her.

A: Okay,

(1.0)

A: He’s talking a lot more. He knows the alphabet now,

(0.5)

D: Yeah.

(0.2)

D: ((sniff))

(0.2)

D: And he, h/e identifies numbers on, Sesame Street ‘n that kind of stuff=

B: Mmm.

B: =Mm hm?

(0.3)

A: I think this therapy’s really hel//ping him,

J: Who knows, .hh (0.5) numbers ‘n letters (huh),

A: A little boy Terry’s age.

(0.4)

--- A: that we know.

The first formulation for this person that A selects is a pronoun, a rather unusual choice for the first mention of a referent (Fox, 1987; Givon, 1983). But this formulation achieves a number of important interactional goals. First, since B has asked about "Karen ‘n everybody," knowing that A and D have recently been to visit Karen’s family, and not just about Karen, it is appropriate for A to include as part of her report the status of members other than Karen. In fact, we can hear B’s "Karen ‘n everybody," for this particular recipient who knows the enumerated set of "everybody," as requesting information about a particular individual. This possibility is made more likely by the fact, as we (as analysts) find out, that there is something "wrong" with someone in the "everybody" class, a someone who B and A, as mothers themselves, might be especially oriented to. The topic is also a "delicate" one, and the pronoun helps to treat it as such, since it is less explicit and thereby allows the reference to be made "obliquely". In all, then, A’s pronominal formulation for B displays for B A’s understanding of all these issues.

But this pronoun, designed as it is for a particular individual adult, does not locate the referent for another
(overhearing) participant of the dinner conversation, namely B’s young son J. J requests a repair of the formulation-to-date, presumably to see if he knows this person who is being characterized as only recently being able to perform child-level activities (and is having to get therapy to be able to accomplish even that), but whose age is otherwise unspecified. A’s response addresses both of the issues here: that J does not know the individual in question (her response is non-recognition-seeking, even anti-recognition-seeking (Schegloff, p.c.)), and that he is a child, even younger than J himself. The appended relative clause warrants the discussion of the child to begin with: since A’s formulation for J did not seek recognition, J can assume that he does not know the child, and therefore from his perspective the child’s relation to his parents’ friends (and therefore to his parents, and himself) is obscure. Do they know about him from reading the newspaper, hearing about him through someone else, or what? The relative clause responds minimally to this issue by telling J that the child is someone that "they know" (where even the referent of we is unclear: is it all the adults present? Just A and D? One family and not the other?).

We can see from this example that the selection of formulation of reference is thoroughly an interactional achievement, which both reflects and constitutes the relations among the participants, and their relation to the topic.

Further evidence of the interactional character of the syntactic choices made in the formulation of reference can be found in another example from our corpus:

(4) (TG: 5-6)

A: And it’s like a mickey mouse course. .hh It’s a joke, hh ih- Speech.
(0.2)
A: .hh//hh
B: Sp/eech,
A: It’s the biggest joke.going.it really is.
(0.3)
B: ((sni//ff))
A: I figure I’m gonna start talking with a lisp and by the end of // the term I’ll get an A // because I have to improve.
B: hhhmhh!
B: .hhh
B: rRi::gh//t. hh
A: Y’know I mean it’s really stupid you go up there
and just slop anything up and anything from there could be an improvement. Y'know, it's a real mickey mouse thing.

B: Mmm.
A: It's really stupid. hh

(0.4)

---->B: Eh-you have anybody: that uh:?

(1.2)

---->B: I would know from the English department there?
A: Mm-mh. Tch! I don't think so.

If we analyze the utterance which contains the relative clause from an information flow perspective, we first notice that the head noun has never been mentioned before and is not part of a frame evoked by earlier discourse and thus is New, human, anchored in its main clause by the pronoun you (Prince, 1981; Fox, 1987), and is an object-head. Now, 90% (19/21) of the humans in object head slot in our corpus occur as subjects in their relative clause (as in they have a son who's 24 or 25), and 85% (61/72) of all New human heads occur as subjects in their relative clause (Fox and Thompson, 1990). Even if we narrow our focus to non-specific human referents, we still find that 87% (26/30) occur in subject-relatives (as in she hates anyone who isn't a Catholic). Example (4), exhibiting as it does an object-relative, does not fall within the statistical patterns which characterize the corpus. In fact, it is the only case of a human in object head slot occurring in an object-relative. The general statistical patterns cannot provide an account of this individual relative clause precisely because there are interactional factors which go into constructing relative clause utterances which are peculiar to a particular social interaction.

First, a bit of background about the participants of the conversation in (4). They are both young women, in college, who (apparently) used to be closer friends than they are when this conversation takes place. They both live in the New York metropolitan area. A is currently attending the college that they used to attend together. The conversation takes place on the telephone (B has called A).

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to support this claim, it would not be difficult to show that A and B have made efforts throughout the phone call to "connect," to create a conversational dynamic that would re-establish/maintain their friendship (that could be heard as "the way friends talk to each other"), and at each such effort they have failed in this attempt (Schegloff, class lectures). The passage given as (4) shows one of these failed efforts. After A's description of her
speech class, B produces a topic proffer related to A's speech class (by topic proffer we mean the offering of a possible topic of conversation):

B: Eh—you have *anybody*: that uh?:

(1.2)

B: I would know from the English department there?

Not only is this a topic proffer here, it is a sensitive proffer, that is it offers a topic which, if taken up, will partially establish that B and A still have a relationship in that they can still gossip about mutually known people, but also which, if not taken up, will move even further towards showing that B and A have "nothing to talk about." In fact, A rejects the proffer, but that is peripheral to the analysis we are building here; we are interested in the syntactic structure B uses for her topic proffer, in particular the use of an object-relative.

We suggest here that the object-relative itself does particular interactional work in this context. Given that the utterance in question performs a topic proffer, about a topic which is sensitive for these two particular women, we could expect that B has several options for how to phrase it. She could provide for a possible rejection on A's part by phrasing it to minimize the significance of a rejection, for example by distancing the topic from her relationship to A. Such a distancing could have been produced by using a relative clause which makes no reference to herself, which would have been quite natural, as in the following invented version:

[invented example]

(5) You have *anybody* that's still around from the English department there?

Such a formulation avoids overtly bringing in B's relationship to the candidates and hence a rejection of this phrasing is, at least on the surface, less of a rejection of A's attention to B's past (and their shared past experiences).

Another option B has for phrasing this utterance is to risk the rejection and to overtly put their relationship on the line by using an object-relative with a first or second person pronoun as subject (that is, their relationship is thus encoded in the grammatical relations of the pronouns). This is the option she
elects; the formulation she elects requires A (1) to remember who B took classes from, or would have known through some other contact, in the English department, and (2) to search to see if she, A, is taking classes from any of those people. Of course, only a close friend would be able to keep track of someone else's history in the way required by (1), so this formulation in a sense maximizes the chance of the proffer failing (but provides stronger proof of their friendship if it succeeds). It is thus possible to see this formulation as a bold, and perhaps foolish, risk, with obvious interactional consequences.

Example (4) thus provides a further illustration of the way in which interactional considerations relate to syntactic choices in the use of relative clauses in formulating reference.

3.0 Conclusion

In this paper, we have provided evidence that the grammatical resources for relative clauses are exploited in the formulation of reference according to a wide range of social factors inherent in the communication situation, and we have argued for an approach to grammar which includes the entire interactional dimension of the communicative situation in which conversationalists constitute the people and things they want to talk about.
REFERENCES


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2. Sacks' exploration of the topic actually addresses the issue from the perspective of the hearer, but it is not difficult to formulate it from the perspective of the speaker.

3. She marks the relative clause's delicacy, however--should that be lost on A--with a long silence.