

Overspecified NPs marking conceptual shifts in narrative discourse*

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1. Introduction

In narrative discourse, speakers and writers often use full descriptions of discourse referents at the beginning of new episodes, whereas they use pronouns to maintain reference *within* episodes. There are also cases in which a given (i.e. ‘activated’) referent within a continuing narrative episode is nevertheless coded by a full NP. Consider sentences such as the following:

- (1) *Ze wandelt door het bos op weg naar een volgend avontuur. Maar Maartje kent het bos niet en ze verdwaalt.* (*She is walking through the forest, looking for adventure. But Maartje doesn’t know the forest and she gets lost*).

In the underlined clause, the writer steps out of the narrative framework of the ongoing story, and contributes additional background information. This discourse shift is accompanied by a full NP, a proper name.

This paper investigates the use of such marked referential expressions occurring *within* narrative episodes. It is hypothesized that they are triggered by conceptual or semantic shifts in the discourse; in cases where the text shifts from, say, description to background information, or from one point of view to another, speakers and writers tend to use more coding material than necessary for identification; they use *overspecified* NPs in order to mark this shift.

2. Theoretical background

Discourse anaphora and semantic structure

The hierarchical and semantic structure of discourse influences the speaker/writer’s choice for a type of referential expression; discourse junctures such as episode shifts

are often accompanied by reinstatement of a full NP, whereas episode continuation is usually reflected by the continued use of pronouns (a.o. Anderson, Garrod & Sanford 1983, Fox 1987, Clancy 1980).

Bolinger (1979) provides an account of the noun/pronoun alternation within (complex) sentences and between consecutive sentences. Consider the following examples (Bolinger 1979:298):

- (2) *He* lied to me — something that *John* was rather fond of doing.
- (3) *He* was quite a guy, if *John* doesn't mind my saying so.

Bolinger observes that looseness or tightness of the connection between clauses — caused by various clues such as comma breaks, adverbs, connectors, verb tense etc. — may influence the (pro)nominalization of a referent. That is, reidentifications in the form of full NPs may occur after a break of some kind.

Topicality and point of view

Another important factor for pronominalization is the general *salience* of discourse referents (a.o. Karmiloff-Smith 1981, Morrow 1985, Fox 1987); a highly topical referent will preferably be coded by a pronoun. It is also typically the character which reflects the *point of view* (henceforth POV) from which a narrative is construed (Kuno 1987, Van Hoek 1995; 1997 *inter alia*).

Consider the following example from Bolinger (1979:308):

- (4) *His* wife knows perfectly well that *Tom* is a jerk.

Reidentifications of this kind can occur in assertions that “may involve an extraneous viewpoint whereby the speaker attributes to the referent some expression that is not (or not entirely) the referent's own at the time: the referent looking at himself, some point of general information, or an opinion of the speaker — a sort of concealed quotation” (Bolinger 1979:308).

Van Hoek (1995, 1997) claims that if (part of) an utterance is construed as being in a cognizing or viewing relationship with a (previously mentioned) corresponding referent, it falls within that referent's semantic domain, triggering pronominal reference to that entity. In a sentence such as

- (5) That *he* was blond worried *John* (Van Hoek 1997:209)

the subclause is construed as representing John's conception, and therefore falls within the semantic domain of the referent *John*, triggering pronominal reference in the subclause. In the sentence

- (6) That *John* was blond worried *him* (*ibid.*)

the subclause — although part of John's conception — is construed as part of knowledge shared by the participants, hence the use of a full NP.

Since viewing and cognizing relations are often implicit, it is sometimes possible to impose different POV configurations onto a given utterance, i.e. to construe a (sub)clause as either conceived by the speaker, by a referent, or as shared knowledge. This explains the variability in (pro)nominal reference involving POV effects (cf. (5) and (6)).

Van Hoek's analysis of discourse anaphora and POV, which is part of her reference point model of anaphora¹, draws on Accessibility theory (a.o. Ariel 1988, 1990). A brief overview of this theory — specifically with respect to conceptual and discourse-structural shifts — is given below.

Accessibility and the unity criterion

Various studies have posited that referential form is subject to conditions concerning the working of human memory and attention (a.o. Chafe 1976, Givon 1983, Tomlin 1987). In Accessibility Theory (Ariel 1988, 1990) *all* referential expressions — i.e. both discourse-initial and anaphoric — have the function of retrieving referent entities from memory. The form of referential expressions is determined by the degree of mental accessibility of the intended referent. Similarly, the degree of accessibility coded by a certain type of referential expression enables the hearer to pick out the intended referent.

Within this theory, the discourse-structural factors affecting referential form (cf. above) are claimed to derive from the general factor of discourse *unity* influencing mental accessibility; the *unity* criterion is defined as the degree to which an antecedent is “within vs. without the same frame/world/point of view/segment or paragraph as the anaphor” (Ariel 1990: 29); when the unity of discourse is disrupted in any way, the resolution of discourse anaphora requires more cognitive effort on the part of the hearer/ reader, and therefore requires the use of lower accessibility markers such as full NPs. The influence of conceptual discourse structure is always mediated (and ultimately determined) by the single factor of accessibility. Note that within this approach, the main function of referential expressions is an identificational one; their form, after all, is only determined by the cognitive effort required to pick out the appropriate entity.

Alternatively, it can be argued that there are more communicative functions to using a referential expression than guiding the hearer/reader to a successful identification of the intended referent. In fact, Ariel acknowledges that referential expressions may serve other purposes besides retrieving entities from memory (Ariel 2001). Additional discourse functions may include that of *attributing additional information* to a given referent (a.o. Maes 1991, Maes & Noordman 1995), or the function of *structuring the discourse*. That is, given a number of attentionally available referential expressions — that would all suffice to identify the intended referent —, the choice may be directly influenced by discourse-structural factors

such as shifts in semantic domain or POV.

This latter view is the working assumption for the present study. An overspecified NP may then occur in spite of high accessibility, and may function not only as *identifier*, as in Ariel (1988, 1990), but also as a *discourse marker*, i.e. as a signal to the addressee that a new semantic domain applies, or that the relevant proposition must be interpreted in a somewhat different context.

3. Material and method

In order to empirically investigate the issue at hand I analyzed a sample of an experimentally elicited corpus of written texts. A group of 285 students — all native speakers of Dutch — was asked to produce a written story ‘on the fly’ on the basis of a series of pictures. (van Vliet, Maes & Schilperoord — in preparation). The subjects were asked to write the narrative in their own pace, on a prestructured tabular page.² The pictures were presented in booklets and told the story of a little girl — the protagonist — and her hand-made dragon. The task therefore largely resulted in a description of the girl and the actions she was involved in.

The next section presents examples of conceptual shifts within narrative episodes, as they were found in the collected corpus. I used the following three criteria in the selection of the examples:

The pictures. The pictures present an independent criterion for establishing the main event line. The present analysis pertains to reference to the protagonist, in sentences where subjects contributed as it were ‘their own material’ (background, evaluation, etc.) on top of the material provided by the pictures.

Predicate types. When the writer stops using action predicates (reflecting the depicted narrative event), but instead uses predicates denoting states, properties, attitudes, etc., this counts as a conceptual shift of some kind.

Topic, Subject, in Focus. The intended referent for analysis, the protagonist, corresponds to the sentence topic and grammatical subject in the analyzed stretches of discourse. It has no ‘competing candidates’ which agree in number and gender. The third criterion for the examples, then, is that the referent be *in focus* (cp. Gundel et al. 1993) at the onset of the conceptual shift. Since the referent is in focus, pronominal reference would lead to unproblematic anaphora resolution. It is therefore assumed that the overspecified referents found in these contexts do not necessarily result from decreased accessibility, but that they may be used as *discourse markers*, to create a shift in point of view, or to actively signal a break in the semantic structure of the discourse segment.

The analysis, presented below, focuses on two types of shift: *attitudinal segments*, where narrators describe the protagonist’s state of mind: an interpretation of her

belief, intentions, desire, etc; and *narrator meta-comments*, in which the narrators added a background or evaluative comment to the story.

4. Analysis of the examples

4.1 Attitudinal propositions

This section discusses cases where the narrator attributes beliefs, intentions, desires etc. to the main character. It attempts to explain the different referential forms used in these contexts, in terms of POV and semantic connectivity.

Overspecified reference

In the following examples, the onset of an attitudinal segment within an ongoing episode is accompanied by the use of full descriptions, i.e. proper names:

- (7) *Ze neemt hem mee uit wandelen door de straten. Maartje besluit om Ø haar opa, die nog ligt te slapen, te doen schrikken.* (*She takes it with her for a walk. Maartje decides to scare her grandfather, who is still asleep*)
- (8) *De hele namiddag zondert ze zich af. Maartje heeft grootse plannen; ze wil een draak ineenknutselen.* Uren zit ze aan haar draak te werken tot ze hem uiteindelijk enkel nog maar moet schilderen. (*She keeps to herself all afternoon; Maartje has great plans: She wants to make a dragon*)

Note that the first sentences in (7) and (8) describe the ongoing events as reflected by the pictures, using pronominal reference to the protagonist. The underlined clauses, on the other hand, reflect an *interpretation* by the narrator: the character's decision in (7) and her conception of "a great plan" in (8) are attributed to her by the narrator, and evoke an *attitudinal segment* or *subworld* (Werth 1999)³ of the character's intentions, ideas, etc. This subworld is first accompanied by a proper name, and then continued (within that same subworld) by a pronoun. Return to the main event line is also accompanied by pronouns.

By using overspecified reference at the onset of the attitudinal segment, the narrator presents that segment as her own contribution or interpretation, from her own rather than the character's point of view.

Pronominal reference

The following examples show that an attitudinal subworld may equally well be introduced by a pronoun:

- (9) Enkele dagen later is het zover: de vakantie is begonnen. Ze wil de buurman lekker laten schrikken. Ze heft de draak op... (The holidays start a couple of days later. She wants to scare her neighbour. She picks up the dragon...)

The underlined clause in this example conveys, strictly speaking, a narrator interpretation concerning the ‘desire’ world of the protagonist, and thus departs from the main event line. Nevertheless, reference is maintained by a pronoun. This can also be observed in the following example:

- (10) Ze loopt rond in het bos maar opeens weet ze niet meer waar ze is. Ze is verdwaald. (She is walking around in the forest but suddenly she doesn’t know where she is. She has lost her way).

Again, this example contains an attitudinal subworld: a narrator interpretation of the protagonist’s knowledge state. However, this is not signaled by overspecified reference. I suggest that whereas the proper names used in (7) and (8) reflect a shift to the *narrator* POV, the pronouns in (9) and (10) reflect the *character* POV. By continuing pronominal reference, the narrator keeps conveying the character POV.

In addition, continued pronominalization emphasizes the semantic connectivity of the attitudinal propositions with the main event line. In (10) this is reinforced by the use of the adverb ‘opeens’ (suddenly); it suggests that the attitudinal proposition reflects an ‘event’ of some kind (albeit in the character’s mind only). This event in turn serves as the cause for the effect described in the final clause. In this way, both the continued pronoun and the temporal adverb contribute to the semantic relations of cause and effect in this sequence.

Direct shift

The previous examples involved utterances evoking a character subworld by means of attitudinal predicates. It was hypothesized that a full NP construes the segment as a narrator interpretation, whereas continued pronominalization suggests a character POV. In some cases, however, the protagonist’s attitudes are expressed even more clearly from the POV of that character; the following utterance lacks an overt attitudinal predicate and seems to provide a direct view or ‘window’ into the character world, as if the character becomes the narrator:

- (11) Ze begint aan een urenlang knutselwerk. Ø nog even de draak schilderen. En klaar is Maartje met haar eigen knutselwerk. (She works for hours. Ø just painting (inf.) the dragon. And Maartje is ready with her artwork).

This sequence starts out as an episode continuation. The underlined utterance, on the other hand, directly reflects a character subworld; the character POV is achieved in two ways: (i) *ellipsis*. Even pronominal reference is left out, but, given the context of the narrative, the statement can be about none other than Maartje. This suggests

that the character herself is the source of the utterance; by using ellipsis, the narrator leaves responsibility for the utterance to the main character. (ii) *markedness*. The marked structure of the sentence (lacking a finite verb) is typical of colloquial speech. It departs from the prototypical sentence types used in narratives, again suggesting the protagonist as the source of the utterance.

This example, then, is not presented as a *report* on the protagonist's state of mind, but instead reflects the attitudinal proposition *directly*; unlike examples (9) and (10), (11) conveys the character POV without the intervention of the narrator's *voice*.

Summary

Summarizing the observations concerning attitudinal propositions, I suggest that the onset of an attitudinal segment does not in itself trigger the use of overspecified reference; rather, it is determined by the extent to which the narrator construes the character attitudes as his/her own interpretation, from his/her own point of view.

The degree of attenuation of referential form, on the other hand, reflects the degree to which the narrator keeps conveying the story from the point of view of the main character. In addition to conveying character POV, nominal attenuation emphasizes the semantic connectivity between the attitudinal proposition and its embedding context,⁴ as in example (10).

4.2 Narrator meta-comment

This section discusses *narrator comments*; the writer provides additional information which is not part of the ongoing event as represented by the pictures, but which is presented in order to explain the *circumstances* of what happens.

In examples (12) and (13) below, the writer provides some background circumstances of the *text world* (cf. note 3) in which the narrative takes place:

- (12) *Ze wandelt door het bos op weg naar een volgend avontuur. Maar Maartje kent het bos niet en ze verdwaalt.* (*She is walking through the forest, looking for adventure. But Maartje does not know the forest and she gets lost*).
- (13) *Ze ging de bossen in maar Maartje was niet gewoon van bossen in te wandelen en Ø raakte snel de weg kwijt.* (*She went into the forest but Maartje was not used to walking through forests and Ø quickly lost her way*).

In (12) and (13) the narrative world shifts to a description of Maartje's personality, say, the general world of this character; her lack of experience is presented as the cause for what happens next.

In these examples, the ongoing narrative uses pronominal reference for the protagonist, the narrator comment is signaled by the use of an overspecified NP, and return to the main event description is accompanied by resumption of the pronoun or zero anaphor. This can be further illustrated by example (14):

- (14) Een tijdje later beseft *ze* dat *ze* verdwaald is en dat *ze* de weg naar huis niet meer weet. Maartje is een pienter meisje en Ø maakt gebruik van haar draak om Ø haar aanwezigheid te tonen. (A little later *she* realizes that *she* is lost and that *she* doesn't know the way home anymore. Maartje is a clever girl and Ø makes use of her dragon to Ø show her whereabouts).

Note that the attitude proposition *preceding* the underlined comment reflects the character POV through continued pronominal reference, whereas the narrator comment is marked by a proper name. Further, observe that when the text shifts back to the main event line (as in examples (8), (12) and (13)), reference can be maintained by zero anaphora.

As pointed out in the preceding section, attitudinal propositions are *optionally* marked by full NPs, depending, presumably, on the POV configuration. The narrator comments found in this corpus, on the other hand, have a strong tendency to be marked by overspecified reference. That is, no counterexamples were found in the analyzed sample. This suggests that some other factors besides POV may add to the choice for a full NP. The following are some suggestions concerning the use of overspecified reference in meta-comments (I include here the POV factor, already discussed above):

- a. *POV*. The basic parameters defining the text world remain the same, but the narrator, in providing her own interpretation, distances herself from the 'stage' of the text world. If we compare the narrator to a camera, it can be said that the camera is 'zooming out' from the text world. That is, overspecified reference may indicate a shift to the narrator POV, analogous to the use of full NPs to convey a narrator interpretation of a character attitude.
- b. *Propositions*. An additional factor may be the nature of a proposition itself, independent from the structure of the text in which it is embedded; certain types of proposition, or rather, certain types of topic-comment relation, may be inherently more likely to contain full NPs. That is, if the proposition describes a more or less permanent property or state, i.e. if the relationship between topic and comment holds invariably or habitually, the referent is often coded by a full description. This is also the case in the comments in (12) and (13): the referent Maartje's unfamiliarity with the environment is relatively constant, whereas her going into the forest is a singular event; the background proposition holds throughout the current text, whereas in the preceding proposition the referent is only temporarily connected to the action described by the predicate. The same holds for (14): the comment describes a permanent property of the character, as opposed to the singular events described by the surrounding propositions.

I propose this hypothesis may find support in Bolinger (1979), who posits that reidentifications may emphasize the nature of the referent: "X qua X; X has the quality suggested by the clause in which X occurs" (Bolinger 1979:291). This can be

illustrated by the following example (ibid.):

- (15) You don't need *sulfur* for drying apricots; *sulfur* ruins the flavor.

The occurrence of overspecified reference in these types of propositions may be reinforced by another factor, outlined below:

c. *Semantic shift*. Apart from conveying a more or less permanent state of affairs, the property-describing narrator comments in examples (12), (13) and (14) also (thereby) instantiate a conceptual/semantic shift: from describing events to providing explanatory background. That is, they add to the conceptual background against which the *main* event line is to be interpreted. In terms of Werth (1999), they represent *world-building* propositions, as opposed to the *plot-advancing* propositions describing the ongoing events.

This shift to background ('world-building') elements is mainly conveyed by predicates — predicates denoting states and properties rather than actions or processes. In addition these transitions are signaled by the use of full NPs.

5. Summary and discussion

Overspecified reference within episodes

The main function of discourse anaphora is reference maintenance, so the first requirement on the coding of a discourse referent is that it be identifiable and accessible within the discourse. However, if these conditions are met, certain factors may trigger the use of an overspecified expression, for purposes of signaling the semantic/conceptual structure of the discourse.

The overspecified NPs found in the analyzed stretches of discourse consist of repeated *proper names* rather than other descriptions such as definite NPs. This suggests that whereas *alternative* descriptions may provide additional information to the referent, *reidentifications* (i.e. repetition of the proper name) are better suited for the function of signaling the discourse structure.⁵

In sum, overspecified reference within episodes may have the following functions: (i) it may convey a shift in POV, whereas pronominal reference continues the current POV; (ii) it marks a transition from the semantic domain of action to the domain of states and properties, or, from plot-advancing to background elements; and (iii) it emphasizes the nature of the referent with respect to its predicate.

Shifts in point of view

An account of overspecified reference in terms of POV may explain the variation in the use of nouns/pronouns/zeros to code the protagonist: In attitudinal propositions,

for example, the speaker/writer may use overspecified reference to construe the character's 'inner world' as her (the narrator's) own interpretation. If, on the other hand, the narrator continues to pronominalize the referent in a narrative shift, this may reflect the decision to continue conveying the protagonist's POV.

This view is largely consistent with Van Hoek's (1995, 1997) analysis of POV effects on (pro)nominalization. There is one difference, however, pertaining to the functions of referential expressions: Van Hoek explains the use of full NPs in terms of low accessibility, resulting from the POV shift. In this paper, on the other hand, the relevant discourse referents are claimed to be *in focus*; an overspecified NP is claimed to function not only as identifier, or, in terms of Van Hoek's model, as a conceptual reference point, but also as a discourse marker.

This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that return to the main text world — which constitutes, strictly speaking, a shift as well (and could therefore also be seen as a factor lowering accessibility) — is often *not* accompanied by a proper name, but may be accompanied by the resumption of pronouns and even zero anaphora, as in examples (8), (12), (13) and (14).

Shifts to background elements

Besides conveying a POV shift, an overspecified NP may also signal another semantic/conceptual juncture in the text. A full NP may indicate a shift from the semantic domain of actions — typically describing the main event line in plot-advancing propositions —, to the domain of states and properties — typically part of more or less permanent background information.

I propose that in the opposite transition (i.e. when the main event line is taken up), there is not such a strong tendency for overspecified reference. This distinction may be reinforced by the nature of the propositions typically used for background elements in texts: a topic-comment relation which holds invariably or habitually is often marked by a full description (cf. previous section).

As for continued pronominalization, on the other hand, this enhances continuity and semantic connectivity, as in example (11), where the attitudinal proposition enhances coherence (cause-effect) relations.

The unity criterion — Revised

Ariel's notion of discourse unity — although it does not, in my view, *necessarily* affect mental accessibility — may be an 'umbrella' notion for the factors described in this paper, namely POV and semantic connectivity. Both POV shifts and narrator comments involve a 'pop' effect from description to interpretation. A psycholinguistic model of the production of referential expressions may merge these two unity factors described above into a single feature that may invoke overspecified NPs as discourse markers. Whether this is indeed possible is a matter for further research.

Concluding remarks

Although referential form is influenced by more factors than accessibility, the requirements of identification (and perhaps even also the default pattern resulting from this basic requirement) are more influential than the other discourse factors, discussed here. In terms of language production, this entails that an intended referent's cognitive status on the one hand, and its discourse-structural status on the other, do not contribute equally to the referential choice; conditions on identifiability and accessibility will override *conflicting* POV or other semantic/conceptual considerations.

The relative importance of factors affecting referential form may also depend on the *genre* of discourse. The observations described in the present paper have at least demonstrated, I hope, that in *narrative* discourse (even when unplanned, i.e. produced on-line), factors such as point of view and semantic/conceptual structure influence the referential form of discourse entities that are in focus. That is, in spite of a single (presumably accessible) protagonist, which would be identifiable by means of a pronoun throughout the narrative, these factors invoke the use of overspecified nominal expressions.

Notes

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1. Van Hoek's model is concerned mainly with semantic constraints on *sentential* anaphora, which are claimed to replace the c-command constraints in generative accounts. Noun phrases, she argues, serve as conceptual reference points for semantic domains relative to which coreferential anaphors are interpreted.
2. The written texts were produced simultaneously with viewing the pictures, so they are a direct result of cognitive processes underlying on-line language production, rather than the result of evaluations of 'text quality'. This suggests that the analysis may be generalizable to *spoken* discourse as well.
3. Within Werth's (1999) theory of discourse representation, a text world is defined by the text and its deictic and referential elements, and by the knowledge frames and inferences it evokes. A departure from the unitary character (say, the parameters) of narrative description evokes a so-called *subworld*; an *attitudinal* subworld consists of *notions* entertained by the protagonists, as opposed to *actions* undertaken by the protagonists in the text world.
4. However, this continuity effect does not apply to zero anaphora in examples like (11), where the narrator *voice* is absent. Other zero anaphora (e.g. in coordinated clauses) *do* contribute to the connectedness of the proposition with its containing text world.
5. The 'proper name' category also draws special attention to the nature of the character. This is especially relevant for 'permanent' state/property descriptions, cf. the (b) factor in Section 4.2.

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