

Editorial

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Place Reference in Interaction

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Abstract: The language of place and space has been intensively studied in relation to grammatical characteristics, cross-linguistic variation, and cognition, as well as with regard to further questions central to social anthropology, psychology, and more. With this special issue, we focus on the pragmatic functions of references to places, as observed in informal social interaction. When people make reference to places in casual, everyday conversation, how do they do it, in what situations, and to what ends? We offer the first collection of findings from research on place reference in spontaneous, multi-party speech, with studies based on conversations recorded in the diverse geographic and cultural environments of outback Australia, highland New Guinea, island Indonesia and rural Mexico. The authors explore, from a range of angles, how and why people talk about place, for example, in regard to the vocabulary and grammar that a language has available to categorise space, and how people choose from among referential options in situated conversation to achieve communicative, social, and practical goals.

Keywords: interaction, language use, linguistic diversity, place, reference

1 Introduction

Identifying and communicating about places is fundamental to how we navigate the physical and social world. Much previous research on place reference has explored the semantics and grammar of reference to place and space (see, e.g., Bloom et al. 1996; Levinson 2003; Levinson and Wilkins 2006, and works cited therein). With this special issue, we complement that literature by focusing on the pragmatic functions of references to places, as observed in informal social interaction. The papers explore issues concerning the functions of reference to place, and their relation to language structure, social cognition and cultural context.

The language of place and space has been intensively studied in relation to grammatical characteristics, cross-linguistic variation, and cognition, as well as with regard to further questions central to social anthropology, psychology, and more (see, e.g., Jarvella & Klein 1982; Haviland 1993; Bloom et al. 1996; Feld & Basso 1996; Senft 1997; Hercus, Hodges & Simpson 2002; Levinson 2003, Casasanto & Boroditsky 2008; Mark et al. 2011; Gentner et al. 2013). Our relationships to places are central to the expression of sociality (e.g., Blu 1996; Wilkins 2002; Schieffelin in press). Recent decades have seen groundbreaking cross-linguistic studies in regard to the diversity of spatial language (e.g., Levinson & Wilkins 2006; Burenhult & Levinson 2008), focusing on the *possibilities* generated by language. Here, we are interested in how people put those possibilities into practice. That is, when people make reference to places in casual, everyday interaction, how do they do it, in what situations, and to what ends?

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Referring is not an unmarked, simple linguistic activity. Referring to something always entails a choice as to which words and constructions to use, and by extension, which words and constructions *not* to use. Research on person reference has shown that speakers attend to a range of constraints and preferences when they choose particular words to refer to persons, with a special orientation to the occasions of use (Sacks & Schegloff 1979; Enfield & Stivers 2007). A central question is whether other aspects of language use follow the established principles of person reference, or have their own unique requirements and affordances (Enfield 2012).

This special issue offers the first collection of findings from research on place reference in spontaneous dyadic or multi-part speech. The studies are based on interactional video data recorded in the diverse geographic and cultural environments of outback Australia, highland New Guinea, island Indonesia and rural Mexico. We explore, from a range of angles, how and why people talk about place, for example, in regard to the vocabulary and grammar that a language has available to categorise space, and how people choose from among referential options in situated conversation to achieve communicative, social, and practical goals.

2 The language of space and place

The extensive literature on the language of space and place (see references above) has revealed a range of expressive resources that languages make available for talking about places. Different sorts of formulations will not only have different semantic and morphosyntactic structures, they will be fitted in different ways to the actions they are used for. Fleshing out the categories Schegloff (1972: 96) suggests for formulating place, we have the following:

- (1) Options that any language will make available for formulation of place reference
 - i. place names (*London, New South Wales, The Hamptons*)
 - ii. words for settings (*bus stop, orange grove, night club*)
 - iii. descriptions (*where they got married, where we met yesterday*)
 - iv. with specifiers (*a/the bus stop, my/our orange grove, a/some night club*)
 - v. topological specifications
 - a. relative (*left of the hut*)
 - b. absolute (*north of the inn*)
 - c. intrinsic (*the back of the house*)
 - vi. demonstratives (*there, here*)
 - vii. gestures (*pointing to places*)

The categories suggested in (1) are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but can be optionally combined (e.g., *next to the bus stop where we met*), or may even require layering (e.g., the potential necessity of a gesture to make a word such as *here* adequately informative), adding to the richness and complexity of place formulations. Multimodality has a special role in place reference because of the role that pointing can play. This is one domain where gesture, in the appropriate sequential context, can consistently be informative over and above spoken words. Using video data assists us to describe and analyse pointing practices in diverse communities, building towards the typology of gesture that has long been called for (e.g., Kita 2003; 2009). The papers in this collection add to our body of knowledge concerning the resources that particular languages have available for place reference, or attend to the related issue of identifying a gap in reference through the use of interrogative pro-forms.

How do resources for place reference compare with those in the domain of person reference? An obvious point of similarity is that they both have unique names as an option, signifiers that identify not just categories (e.g., *a friend who lives abroad*) but particular individuals (e.g., *Anabel in Zürich*). Blythe's paper in this collection shows that person and place names even share features in relation to taboos. We might further speculate that the topological specifiers of place reference find an analog in kinship terms for people, but this possible parallel remains to be explored.

There are also some obvious differences between place and person reference. Conceptually, places are more fractal in the sense that individual places *contain* other individual places and one can freely zoom in and out. That we can answer the question *Where are they?* with *In Compartment 4*, *In Amsterdam*, *In the Netherlands* and *In Europe* does not have an exact analogue in the domain of person reference. While reference to a person can be formulated in a wide variety of ways, activating a vast range of categories and relationships, this fractal quality is absent. A related issue is the indeterminacy of place as a category. As Wilkins (2002) discusses, what can be construed as a place is highly flexible and contingent. A *chair* can be an object that needs moving, or a place where someone is. *Australia* can be a location or a nation. Place seems to command an almost unbounded variety of possible referents, and thus, referential resources (for example the use of tree names, discussed in the following section). In interaction, this leads to situations in which where-questions are answered through reference to other categories (as noted in San Roque's paper), and vice versa, in examples of 'ontological crossings' (as discussed in Sicoli's paper).

3 Place Reference in Interaction

When people refer to a place they must make a choice from among options such as those listed in (1). They select their words for specific communicative ends, in specific contexts. This fundamental point about referential formulation was made by Schegloff (1972) in his exploration of reference to locations. Schegloff stressed that when people formulate reference, they reveal a complex analysis of the speech situation. He argued that a referential formulation—such as *home* in *It's good to be home*—shows three kinds of analysis: (1) a *location analysis* (a construal of the referent in some specific terms such that it may be identifiable, given that there are multiple ways of putting it), (2) a *membership analysis* (concerning social statuses of the interactants, including the things that people are assumed to be able to understand and recognise; cf. also Goodwin 2003; Sidnell & Barnes 2013), and (3) a *topic analysis* (or 'activity analysis'; a fit with the activity or action being carried out by the utterance). Under his notion of topic analysis, Schegloff lists possible 'sorts of formulations', as already outlined. These various grammatical possibilities for formulation are qualitatively distinct alternatives that, it is suggested, may be appropriate for different kinds of speech acts or social actions.

In looking at conversation, then, we can initially ask what shapes place reference formulation. Answers to this question can in turn support inquiry into whether these principles are broadly universal or highly culture-specific, and whether referential mores belong to particular domains, such that the formulation of person, place, time, cause, etc. follow different rules, or express more general principles of interaction.

In regard to place, one task is to determine the right ontological categories, and how they interface with both referential formulation and the action that is being undertaken by a speaker. For example, a 'setting' is a different kind of referential domain from a 'location'. In preliminary cross-linguistic work on place reference conducted at the Max Planck Institute in Nijmegen, our project team observed a clear distinction between references to *settings* (e.g., in launching a telling, to invoke a rich context, not only of a place but of the people and activities that happen there) and references to *locations* (e.g., in telling or asking someone where something is, for instance, so that someone may be able to find it). The distinction between setting and location maps loosely onto a semiotic function of characterising (who or what is found there, what happens there) versus identifying (where it is). See Dingemanse, Rossi and Floyd (2017) for explication and discussion of this distinction. As a further example, consider place references involving landscape features such as rivers, forests, and streams.

On the one hand, landscape references can be settings, not saying where something is, but conveying a kind of place with properties that are relevant to what is being spoken about, and invoking their properties for the action or line of talk at hand (Schegloff's 'topic analysis'; cf. Stivers 2007, Enfield 2010). For example, in conversations between speakers of Kri, a Vietic language of Laos (from a corpus gathered by Enfield), we observe examples in which the 'forest' (*bruuq* in Kri) is mentioned when the notion of something being unconnected from the village is relevant to what the speaker is saying. In a conversation about a villager who has been shirking his duties by staying far from the village, a speaker notes 'they shouldn't live in the

forest, ‘I think it’s not good that he goes to stay in **the forest** without coming back to the village’. Other ways of referring to place would have been possible, but the use of the landscape term ‘forest’ allows the speaker to highlight the ‘awayness’ that he is trying to emphasise in order to support the stance he is taking.

On the other hand, landscape references can be locations, functioning purely as landmarks, with no intention of highlighting the character of the place, but serving to communicate where something is located, or where an event happened. However, this is not to say that presenting a place as a location is always some kind of ‘neutral’ reference. Cutting across the setting/location distinction, the speaker must always calibrate his or her formulation appropriately with respect to the addressee’s knowledge and to the common ground that is established between interlocutors (i.e., relating more to Schegloff’s location and membership analyses).

In many rural communities, people are extremely knowledgeable about the trees in their local environment, and the average person might know dozens, if not hundreds, of tree species by name. Given the flexible range of what can be a ‘place’ in reference, this shared body of knowledge allows trees to be a useful form for identifying locations. Here is an example from Kri, in which one speaker is talking to another about where a swidden field is to be fenced off (2).

- (2) *cùp nuu nì lee mee rôôq baa kùl lkêêm naaq*
 chop.up LOC DEM.here and make fence side tree.species DEM.there
 ‘Chop (the wood) up here and make a fence **on the side of that lkêêm tree.**’

The speaker conveys the precise location with reference to a *lkêêm* tree (*Pterocarya tonkinensis* or ‘Tonkin Wingnut’). Another example is (3), in which a speaker states where he plans to pioneer a new swidden field for the next year.

- (3) *teeq ci teeq kaaq mee quu taam tòòn crì naaq*
 1SG irr 1SG estimate do LOC alongside tree.species DEM.there
 ‘I will- I estimate (that I’ll) make (it; i.e., next year’s swidden) **alongside the crì tree(s) there.**’

In this case, the speaker conveys the precise location with reference to a *crì* tree (*Ficus microcarpa* or ‘Chinese Banyan’).

This strategy is widespread if not universal (see also Williams’ paper in this special issue). An example from a completely different area of the world comes from a conversation in Cha’palaa (4), a Barbacoan language of Ecuador (data courtesy of Simeon Floyd).

- (4) E: *nuka-a man-tuu-yu*
 where-Q again-chop.wood-EGO
 ‘Where did you chop (wood)?’
 H: *aan-ku kejtala man-tuu-yu*
 DEM-LOC between again-chop.wood-EGO
kaa shi- shipij-chi chu-de-na-su jun-tala¹
 small mad- madroña-tree sit-PL-POS-IRR DEM-among
 ‘(I) chopped (it) there in the middle around **where the small madroña tree is.**’

In this Cha’palaa example a precise location is communicated with reference to a specific tree (*madroña* = *Arbutus menziesii*).

And in an example from Siwu (a Kwa language of Ghana), a speaker communicates specific locational information with reference to a coconut palm (data courtesy of Mark Dingemans). A, B and C are chatting

¹ Relative clauses are formed with irrealis plus demonstrative. The plural marker may indicate a grove of trees rather than a single one, or refer to the forest in general.

in an outdoors setting when A asks for directions to the house of another person known to B and C. Speakers B and C start co-constructing an answer:

(1) A: *nɛ ilɛke láa bua lòkí kɔ̃rɔ́ láa bó Kodzo iyo ní:*
and where 1SG:FUT get 1SG:turn now 1SG:FUT reach PSN house fp:Q
‘So where would I pass now to reach Kodzo’s house?’

B: *nyà n[ɛ-*
look TP
‘Look,’

C: *[fɔ si- fɔ si Kodzo lo [bùa ɔ -*
you if you if PSN REL get you
‘If you- if you want to get to Kodzo you-

B: *[ɔ- nya, sí a bɔrɛ ngbe nɛ:,*
he look if you come.out here TP
‘Y- look, if you come out here,’ ((points))

A: *ai.*
intj
‘Yeah.’

B: *á ki ɛɛ- a ki ngbe kumið gɔ́ngbe a bɔrɛ ɛɛ*
2SG turn HES 2SG turn here like.this REL.here you come.out HES
‘You turn uh- you turn here like this and you get to uh
ɛɛ nda tá mà rɔ́ ní?
HES how PROG 3PL call fp:Q
uh how do they call it?’

(0.6)

A: *ɛɛ:*
HES
‘u:h.’

(2.6)

B: *kùbe dziri mmò nɛ.*
coconut tree there TP
‘the coconut tree there,’

A: *ai.*
INTJ
‘Yeah.’

B: *gɔ á sò a ki mmɔ́ɔ ɔ̀ kare sɔ, Kodzo iyo ɛɛ:*
when you descend you turn there you:PFV ask QT PSN house Q
‘if you descend and pass there, you just ask, “what about Kodzo’s house?”’

A: *mm.*
INTJ
‘Mm.’

B: *iyò òte kà máa te ɔ.*
 then NMZ:teach imm 3PL:FUT teach you
 ‘Then they’ll point it out to you.’

A: *ai.*
 INTJ
 ‘Yeah.’

These examples show the utility of reference to immobile objects such as trees as landmarks for characterising locations, that is, for saying where something can be found rather than for establishing a setting for people and activities to be discussed.

Demonstratives provide an alternative, stripped-back way of invoking locations without describing them in detail. Forms such as *here, this, there, that, upstream, downstream, yon, yonder* rely on spatial reference for specifying ‘which one’ the speaker is talking about or ‘in which place’ something happened or will happen. That said, they also can do some stance-taking work, as they comprise definite/specific references, which we might assume are used by default when a degree of information is shared between interlocutors (Enfield 2003).

By contrast, place references involving place names may, in some societies, be relatively rare, perhaps brought into play when demonstrative reference alone isn’t enough. In the Kri conversational material mentioned above, locations such as an old Kri village site, upstream from where the speech event is taking place, that is not frequently visited and not ‘active’ in the common ground is referred to by name, *Ting Tuu*, whereas the bustling Nakai district centre, constantly visited and referred to by speakers, is referred to simply with the demonstrative *côôh* ‘downstream’.

4 Overview of the Special Issue

This collection takes up and discusses questions of place formulation with reference to linguistic resources, ontological categories, epistemic grounding, interactional goals and referential choice.

Joe Blythe, Kinngirri Carmelita Mardigan, Mawurt Ernest Perdjert and Hywel Stoakes write about the Australian language Murrinhpatha, spoken by about 2700 people living in a cluster of communities around Wadeye in Australia’s Northern Territory. This multi-authored paper approaches place reference from the novel perspective of place name avoidance. If a place name cannot be spoken because of particular cultural restrictions, how, then, do people work to achieve reference? This problem is especially tantalising given that Murrinhpatha has few abstract directional terms. A strong theme that emerges from spontaneous Murrinhpatha data is the co-construction of place reference, to the extent that speakers who must avoid a particular place name may explicitly request an interlocutor to voice the problematic name on their behalf. Probing place reference practices further, Blythe et al. use a novel interactive experimental task to carefully track the use of demonstratives, pointing and landmarks for direction-giving by Murrinhpatha speakers. They find that certain decisions about place reference formulation are affected by the relative epistemic positions of speaker and hearer, demonstrating how talk about location is keyed into our awareness of interlocutor knowledge and informational goals. Furthermore, the authors argue that the reliance on pointing for communicating spatial vectors requires us to understand language as multi-modal, incorporating gesture as a core part of meaning.

Mark Sicoli looks within a corpus of more than 40 hours of conversational data in Lachixío Zapotec—an indigenous language of Oaxaca, Mexico. He gives an overview of the linguistic resources available for describing place in Lachixío Zapotec and investigates real-life formulations of place as an integral part of social interaction. Sicoli’s work reveals how concepts of place in Lachixío Zapotec can resonate through referential actions, as seen in the phenomenon of ontological crossings, for example, where places are identified through reference to people, and vice versa. Place is furthermore explored in relation to displays of stance that are progressively developed through conversational turns, contributing to the establishment—

or disputation—of common ground between speakers. Ultimately, as Sicoli discusses, talk about place in this community reflects and constructs a moral geography that associates positive values with the physical and social world of the village, grounded in dense networks of kin and relationships. Such talk may also accord negative values to the unmoored and asocial world beyond.

Nick Williams presents an account of reference to place in Kula, an endangered non-Austronesian language of southeastern Indonesia. Drawing on video recordings of everyday interaction, Williams gives the first description of certain structural resources for referring to place in Kula, focusing on the use of place names, elevationals, terms for landscape features, and manual and non-manual pointing. He closely examines examples of place reference in Kula conversation, including discussion of both adequate and apparently problematic formulations, and comparison to typical practices of person reference.

Lila San Roque investigates place formulation from the ‘other side’ of reference, that is, in relation to words like *where?* as used in the language Duna, spoken in Hela Province in Papua New Guinea. Where-expressions in Duna are morphologically complex, but it seems possible that a former basic ‘where’ root has provided a foundation for other interrogatives such as ‘when’, suggesting the relevance of place to other ontological categories, as discussed in Sicoli’s work. San Roque finds that where-questions are frequent in Duna conversation, while an examination of the responses they elicit also suggests their functional flexibility. From a small data sample, it appears reasonably common for people to reply to where-questions with information that does not represent a canonical place reference, for example identifying a person or activity. San Roque puts forward the hypothesis that where-questions may provide a good all-purpose option for seeking information and maintaining interaction, in contrast to potentially more sensitive interrogatives such as who-questions. The paper further contributes to developing the typology of interrogatives and their responses in interaction, as well as commenting on the acquisition of where questions from a developmental perspective.

We have three hopes for the papers in this collection. First, we hope that they make a contribution to research on the linguistics of space and place. One major tradition has focused on place names and their cultural importance, while another has focused on the abstract semantic and grammatical potential for reference to spatial location. The work included in this collection goes some way to bridging these interests, by viewing different possibilities for spatial reference as meaningfully context-situated.

Second, we hope that the papers in this collection make a contribution to research on the nature of linguistic reference more broadly. Linguistic reference has been a major topic in the philosophy of language and in linguistic semantics. But there has been relatively little attention to reference in the wild. The studies presented here show ways in which reference is not merely about connecting words to the world, but is, just as much, about inviting construal, inferring intent, and invoking identity.

Third, we hope that the papers contribute to the growing awareness that linguistic systems are not just sets of arbitrary carvings-up of a defined semantic space. We are learning that semantic systems are, perhaps primarily, pragmatic systems, in the sense that to choose one of the alternatives that a system provides is to choose against the others. This is often taken to have effects on the abstract meaning intended, in ways reminiscent of Saussure’s notion of a system. But when the selection of alternatives is studied through the lens of situated social interaction, as in the papers collected here, we see that the possibilities for reference form a set of task-specific tools for constructing actions in social life.

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Abbreviations

DEM demonstrative
 EGO egophoric
 FP final particle
 HES hesitation
 IMM immediate
 INTJ interjection
 IRR irrealis
 LOC locative
 NMZ nominaliser
 PFV perfective
 PL plural
 POS positional
 PROG progressive
 PSN person name
 Q question
 QT quotative
 REL relative
 SG singular
 TP topic marker

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