

Referential choice in narrative texts: Rhetorical use and interpretation

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Referential choice is a key topic that has been widely studied by reference theorists. There are several well-known theoretical models (e.g. Ariel 1990 and Gundel et al. 1993) and many practical studies (e.g. Kibrik et al. 2016, Achim et al. 2017, Almor et al. 2017, Fossard et al. 2018, and Vogels et al. 2019). In Ariel's model, for example, a link is made between referential forms and a scale of cognitive accessibility. Generally, there is a match between the cognitive status and referential forms, but Ariel notes that there are some special uses which break expectations (Ariel 1990: 198ff; see also Scott 2020). In this talk, I look in more detail at special rhetorical uses of referring expressions in narrative texts, such as where referents are over- or under-specified, as well as the utilisation of marked perspectival techniques. Cases of over-specification that will be examined include the use of non-initial full descriptions that are unnecessary for the purposes of disambiguation and which go beyond standard variation, particularly where they are heavily repeated or where very full descriptions are presented at a late stage in a narrative. Cases of under-specification that will be discussed include the use of indefinite and antecedentless pronouns. I use Sanford and Emmott's (2012) rhetorical processing model to provide a framework for these special rhetorical uses. I also suggest that the general notion of available knowledge can be enhanced by cognitive modelling of the information available to readers about participants, participant groupings and spatio-temporal contexts (e.g. Emmott 2015). I argue that the examples discussed have implications for theoretical models of referential choice and indirect anaphora, as well as being crucial for rhetorical purposes such as foregrounding key messages, producing perspectival effects, and creating plot interest and suspense in narratives. The analysis presented draws on my stylistic examination of a range of narratives (from (auto-)biographies, literary texts and popular fiction) as well as including some discussion of relevant empirical work from psycholinguistics.

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