**CHAPTER 15**

Reference and Deixis

15.1 Reference

**Reference** is concerned with designating entities in the world by linguistic means.

**15.1.1 Definite reference**

There are various types and modes of reference. We shall concentrate on three:

**definite reference, indefinite reference,** and **generic reference.**

To open the discussion of definite reference, consider the two sentences below:

(1) The man gave it to her.

(2) A man gave it to her.

How does the meaning of sentence (1) differ from the meaning of sentence (2)?

In (1), the intended referential target is necessarily a particular entity (believed by the speaker to fall into the category MAN). This means that the speaker should be able, on demand, to give information that for them distinguishes the (man) in question from all other men. The speaker may not be able to name the man, or even give any descriptive information: for instance, what makes the man unique may be only that he occasioned an auditory experience on the part of the speaker at a particular time and place. Once again, the information which enables the hearer to uniquely identify the intended referent may be minimal.

**15.1.2 Indefinite reference**

Sentence (2) above is an example of indefinite reference. The essence of indefinite reference is that the identity of the referent is not germane to the message: that is, nothing hinges on the individual features of the referent, only the class features indicated are presented as relevant. Suppose someone complains of extreme boredom, and in response I pick up a book and offer it to them, saying either (i) *Here, read a book,* or (ii) *Here, read this book.* What is the difference? In both cases the identity of the book is clear to both participants. The difference is that in (i), the identity of the book is not germane, just the

fact that it is a book, whereas in (ii), the identity of the book is presented as (a) important to the message (e.g. *You're bound to find this particular one interesting),* and (b) accessible to the hearer.

**15.1.3 Generic reference**

Now consider the following sentences:

(16) The tiger is a friendly beast.

(17) A tiger is a friendly beast.

(18) Tigers are friendly beasts.

All three sentences have readings which involve what is called **generic reference,** that is, reference to a class of referents. All of the above predicate friendliness as a general characteristic of the members of the class of tigers.

**15.2 Definite reference**

We shall henceforward concentrate on definite reference, which is arguably the prototypical type of reference.

**15.2.1 Types of definite referring expression**

The following types of expression are definite referring expressions in English:

(i) noun phrase with definite determiners: the book, this book, that book,

my book, your book, his book, her book, our book, their book;

(ii) personal pronouns: I, you, he, she, it, us, they;

(iii) proper names: John, Mary, Paris, *Gone with the Wind, Middlemarch,* Notre Dame, Parsifal, Guernica;

(iv) certain locative adverbs: here, there, yonder;

(v) certain temporal adverbs: now, then, yesterday, next Xmas, (certain verb tenses).

**15.3 Deixis**

Deixis means different things to different people. For Buhler (1934), any expression which located a referent in space or time was a deictic expression. Thus, for him, *The cat sat on the mat* contained a deictic locative expression, namely, *on the mat.* In the sentence *That cat sat on the mat,* however, the cat is located not only with respect to the mat, but also with respect to the speaker, *that* indicating (probably) that the cat was relatively distant from the speaker. A point of disagreement concerns the deictic status of the definite article. Some scholars consider it to be deictic, because the

current context of situation is involved in referent identification. Others exclude the definite article, because it does not locate the referent on any specific parameter. We shall initially recognize five main types of deixis: **person deixis, spatial deixis, temporal deixis, social deixis,** and **discourse deixis.**

**15.3.1 Person deixis**

Person deixis involves basically the speaker, known as the **first person,** the addressee, known as the **second person,** and other significant participants in the speech situation, neither speaker nor hearer; these are known as **third person.** All of these, at least in English, come in singular and plural form.

**Singular Plural**

1st person I/me we/us

2nd person you you

3rd person he/him, she/her, it they/them

**15.3.2 Spatial deixis**

Spatial deixis manifests itself principally in the form of locative adverbs such as *here* and *there,* and demonstratives/determiners such as *this* and *that.* English has a relatively impoverished spatial deictic system, with only two terms, usually labelled **proximal** and **distal.**

**15.3.3 Temporal deixis**

Temporal deictics function to locate points or intervals on the time axis, using (ultimately) the moment of utterance as a reference point. There are thus three major divisions of the time axis: (i) before the moment of utterance, (ii) at the time of utterance, (iii) after the time of utterance. The most basic temporal deictics in English are *now* and *then. Now* is in some ways a kind of temporal

*here,* and displays the same capacity for indefinite extension. That is, it can refer to a precise instant: *Press the button—Now!;* or it can accommodate a wide swathe of time: *The solar system is now in a relatively stable phase*.

**15.3.5 Discourse deixis**

Discourse deixis refers to such matters as the use of *this* to point to future discourse elements, that is, things which are about to be said, as in *Listen to this, it will kill you!,* and *that* to point to past discourse elements, as in *That was not a very nice thing to say.* In a similar spirit, the *hereby* of an explicit performative sentence could be said to point to current discourse: *Notice is hereby served that if payment is further delayed, appropriate legal action will be taken.* It is sometimes claimed that certain sentence adverbs, such as *therefore* and *furthermore,* include an element of discourse deixis in their meaning, as they require the recovery of a piece of previous discourse to be understood. *Therefore*

*and furthermore* could be glossed: "It follows from that" and "In addition to that", respectively, (where *that* is a discourse deictic).