

FOREGROUNDING REFERENTS: A RECONSIDERATION
OF LEFT DISLOCATION IN DISCOURSE

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I. GOALS AND ORIENTATION

In this paper we discuss a set of verbal constructions found in spontaneous conversational discourse. These constructions have in common the following format: Referent + Proposition. That is, some referent is specified initially and is then followed by a proposition relevant in some way to this referent.

(1) GTS4-1

(K has been talking about fact that his car
radio was taken from his car)

REF

K: They cleaned me out. And my father oh he's
PROP

//he's fit to be tied.

R: Tell Daddy to buy you some more.

For example, in (1), "And my father oh he's-//he's fit to be tied." represents such a construction. Here the referent expressed by "my father" is semantically related to the subsequent proposition "he's-//he's fit to be tied."

Constructions of this type have been previously described as left-dislocations (Chafe 1975, Gruber 1967, Gundel 1975, Ross 1967 for example). Left-dislocation represents a transformation that moves an NP within the sentence. The term left-dislocation is not entirely appropriate to the constructions considered in the present analysis. First, although the proposition following the initial referent usually contains a coreferential pronoun, it sometimes does not. Example (2) illustrates such a case:

(2) Two Girls; 8

(in discussion about reading required for courses)

REF

B: ohh I g'ta tell ya one course, ((pause))
A: (incred-)

REF

B: The mo-the modern art the twentieth century
PROP
art, there's about eight books.

Secondly, left-dislocation is a formal operation that transforms one sentence into another. However, many of the constructions in our data look more like discourses than sentences. That this has not been previously appreciated is due to the failure to examine these constructions in their context of use.

In the discussion to follow we consider the communicative work being performed in utterances of the form: Referent + Proposition. This involves first familiarizing the reader with the discourse contexts in which such utterances are employed. In particular, we turn our attention to the role of the initial referent in the discourse. What is the relation of the initial referent to the discourse history, for example? What is the relation of the initial referent to subsequent discourse? We argue that the status of the initial referent as definite /new or given/new (Chafe 1975) needs further clarification. Specifically it will be argued that a critical factor is the need of the speaker to provide appropriate old information, i.e. old information relevant to the main point expressed about the referent.

After assessing the function of these constructions in the discourse at hand, we present alternative strategies for carrying out the same communicative work. These strategies involve a sequence of two or more utterances. In the first utterance, a referent is introduced into the discourse. In the subsequent utterance(s), propositions relevant to that referent are expressed. We argue that Referent+Proposition constructions share many of the properties of these sequences.

II. DATA BASE

Our analysis is based primarily on transcriptions made by G. Jefferson of five group therapy sessions (GTS) in which several adolescents took part (approximately 500 pages). Material on children's use of the constructions under study is drawn from transcriptions of the conversations of twins recorded over the period of a year. (33 mos. - 45 mos.) (Keenan 1974).

III. ROLE OF REFERENT + PROPOSITION IN THE DISCOURSE HISTORY

A. BRINGING REFERENTS INTO DISCOURSE:

What is the speaker doing when he produces utterances of the form "Referent+Proposition", as expressed in example (1)? As a first step in answering this question, we construct a series of hypothetical discourses. Imagine the following dialogues:

Interlocutor A

- * (A) What happened to Tom?
 ? (B) What happened to Tom?
 (C) What happened to Tom?

Interlocutor B

As for
 Concerning Tom, he left.
 Tom, he left.
 His car, it broke down,
 and he's depressed.

Each of these dialogues varies in its degree of acceptability. Dialogue (A) appears the most awkward, and in fact, we did not find any instances in the data in which as for X, concerning X, appeared following an immediately prior mention of X. (B) as well is odd. The most natural way to utter such a sequence is to utter the second "Tom" with a question intonation, indicating that perhaps he had not heard the speaker, e.g. "Tom? He left". We can imagine, however, that such a discourse is possible if a long pause separates the two utterances and/or if the addressee(B) repeats "Tom" in the course of searching for an adequate response.

Discourse (C) is by far the most natural of the three presented here. And in fact, constructions of the form "Referent + Proposition" appear most often in precisely this sort of discourse environment, namely, an environment in which the referent does not appear in the immediately prior discourse. Chafe (1974) discusses the fact that may or may not be presently in the consciousness of the hearer. If a referent is in the consciousness of the hearer, the referent is said to be "foregrounded". In English foregrounded information may be syntactically marked by the speaker by use of the definite article, anaphoric pronoun, relative clause and the like. We would like to claim here that in producing constructions of the form "Referent + Proposition" speakers are performing work of precisely the opposite sort: Rather than presenting information that is already in the foreground of the listener's consciousness, the speaker brings a referent into the foreground of the listener's consciousness (See also Sankoff & Brown 1975). With respect to the interactional history of the interlocutors, the referent is usually not currently a "center of attention" i.e. not usually the current "topic" (in the sense described by Li and Thompson 1976). In producing constructions of this sort, the speaker makes the referent a "center of attention" (See also Payne 1974).

Typically, the initial referent is some entity known to or knowable by the hearer from the non-verbal context of the utterance from some prior background experience. In other words, it is some entity that the hearer can identify or recognize. The referent may or may not have been discussed at some point in the current discourse participated in by the interlocutors:

1.) In many cases, the speaker uses the "Referent + Proposition" construction to INTRODUCE discourse-new referents. Examples (2) (3) & (4) exhibit this work:

(2) GTS4:15

REF

PROP

K: Uh Pat McGee. I don't know if you know him, he
-he lives in//Palisades.

J: I know him real well as a matter of fa(hh)
 (he's) one of my best friends

K: He-he used to go to the school I did// an' he-

J: No, no(hh)

K: He was in the dorm with me, and I was over him-
 and he-he had a room/ An' he-

J: No! (hh)// heh heh

K: -he despised me.

(3) GTS1:97

REF

L: yeh, that c'd b e, cawss my sister, 'hh she
 PROP

en her boy friend jus broke up becawss he ast
me tu me tuh go out with um:

(4) GTS3:62

(Adolescents discussing how parents treat them)

K: Yeah// Yeah! No matter how old// you are

L: Yeah. Mh hm

REF

L: Parents don't understand. But all grownups
 PROP

w-they do it to kids. Whether they're your
 own or not.

2.) On the other hand, some referent may have been in the foreground of the interlocutor's mind at some prior point in the conversation but feel to the background subsequently. In these instances, the speaker may use the "Referent+Proposition" construction to REINTRODUCE a referent into the discourse. It should be emphasized here that a referent may fall into the background rapidly after its first mention. It sometimes happens that a referent must be reforegrounded after one turn or even after one utterance within a turn. Example (5) illustrates a re-introduced referent:

(5) GTS3:37

K: An' I got a red sweater, an' a white one, an'
 a blue one, an' a yellow one, an' a couple
 other sweaters, you know, And uh my sister
loves borrowing my sweaters because they're
pullovers, you know, an' she c'n wear a blouse
under'em an' she thinks "Well this is great"
 (pause)

REF

PROP

K: An' so my red sweater, I haven't seen it since

I got it.

B. FUNCTIONS OF FOREGROUNDING:

Once the global function of these constructions, i.e. to bring into the foreground or focus on some referent (c.f. Sankoff & Brown 1975), is understood; more particular functions of this phenomenon make sense. 1) ALTERNATIVES: In many cases, the speaker uses this construction to bring in a different referent from one previously specified with respect to some particular predication. The speaker in these cases suggests a ALTERNATIVE to that produced in a prior utterance or turn. Example (4) illustrates this usage. We avoid the term "contrast" to describe this function, as "contrast" usually implies that the referent brought in in "contrast" is an alternative considered (with varying degrees of certitude) by both hearer and speaker (Chafe 1975, Kuno 1972). The way in which many of these "Referent + Proposition" constructions is used is much broader than this treatment of contrast. In the data at hand, the speaker may bring in a referent that the hearer has not yet entertained as a viable alternative. For example, in (4) the referent "all grownups" is not a set that was under consideration by those listening to L.

2) PARTICULAR CASES: The "Referent + Proposition" construction is used to draw the listener's attention to a particular case of some general phenomenon under discussion or to some particular member of a previously specified set. For example, in (5) the speaker is isolating "my red sweater" from a previously mentioned list of items. Perhaps the most common use of this construction is to introduce referents that further illustrate the current topic of discussion. (Note that the referents in themselves do not constitute topics of discussion (discourse topics) but rather are important arguments in a proposition or set of propositions (discourse topic) under consideration in discourse. (c.f. Keenan and Schieffelin 1976)) For example, the discourse in (2) is preceded by a discussion about people who do not like one another. The introduction of "Pat McGee" initiates a case history relevant to the current topic or concern of the interlocutors. Similarly, in (6) below, the interlocutors have been talking about students falling asleep in class and K can't resist being in a relevant anecdote:

(6) GTS5:35

	REF	PROP
K:	Uh:: <u>this guy</u> , you could yell "Hey Jo:hn, hey Joh-" 'n you c'd go over an'tap him on the shoulder	
R:	So he's gotta//good imagination	
	PROP	
K:	<u>That's the only way you c'd snap him out of it.</u>	

It isn't always the case that the introduction of novel referents as particular cases involves speaker change. In many cases, a speaker may bring up a certain point and use the "Referent + Proposition" construction to illustrate his/her own point. For example in (7) below, there has been some discussion about how parents never treat their children as mature individuals (see also example (4)) and L. brings up the point that her parents are exceptions to this generalization. By way of illustration, L. describes an incident in which her mother plays a major role:

(7) GTS3:63

L:	Well my parents are different. I- it isn't my parents that do it to me, cause my <u>my</u>
	REF, REF, PROP,
	mother, like my little sister, she had a party.
	PROP,
	So she says to the girls, "Just don't get pregnant"
	(pause)
D:	heh heh heh

Notice here that we have a case of a complex "Referent + Proposition" construction in which one Referent + Proposition is embedded in another. The "Referent + Proposition" construction "like my little sister, she had a party" is embedded in the Referent + Proposition construction "my mother,...so she says to the girls, 'Just don't get pregnant'".

3) SPECIAL EMPHASIS: In some cases, the "Referent + Proposition" construction may be used neither to introduce nor re-introduce a referent but to mention again a referent currently in the foreground of the interlocutors' minds. We argue that this use is secondary rather than basic to such constructions. In these cases, the speaker is using the basic function of focussing the listener's attention on some referent to amplify the attention paid to some referent under discussion. In other words, the speaker uses the basic focus function to give SPECIAL EMPHASIS or importance to a particular entity. Example (8) illustrates this use.

(8) GTS1-43

	(discussing younger siblings)
L:	T'know some of 'em are darfn tall and goodlooking they could pass for (t)-nineteen.// A twelve year old guy comes over I say who's y-older brother is he? He's not he's in the A7.
R:	But they don't-
R:	But they don't have a brain to go with it hehhh

- (9) GTS3:70
(In discussion about attitudes towards young siblings)
REF BACKGROUND PROPS
L: My sister when we were up in camp when she was twelve. And all the guys were sixteen, (pause) and fifteen. They don' wanna do out with twelve year olds. So I let everyone know
MAIN PROP
that she was thirteen and a half, almost fourteen.
- (10) GTS3:47
REF BACKGROUND PROPS
K: Y'know, the cops if they see you, and they think
MAIN PROP
"Well, he's 18," A lotta time they'll letcha by, quicker than a 16 year old or a 17 year old.
- (11) GTS3:64
(L has been talking about how her car broke down)
REF
K: Oh-oh wait. In Mammoth my Jeep I've got surf
BACKGROUND PROPS
stickers all over the back windows you know?
L: Mm//hm
K: An' up there they hate surf. Surf is the lowe//st
thing, in the world. An' all the adults frown upon it, the kids hate 'em, they see me, an' they used to throw rocks // you know? An' I was avoiding rocks. So I finally decided this
MAIN PROP
isn't for me y'know, I took razor blades, took all my surf stickers off? So it looked like just a normal everyday Jeep...

See also example (2).

In these cases it appears that the speaker refers to some entity then realized that he must provide additional information. For example, in (11) K has to provide information about his Jeep and about the atmosphere in Mammoth so that the addressee can understand the activity described in the major predication, i.e. that K had to take stickers off the windows of the Jeep in Mammoth. Similarly in (2), K had to provide further information concerning Pat McGee, i.e. that he lived with K, so that the hearer would understand the relevance of the referent to the topic under discussion.

These observations indicate that the Referent + Proposition construction is a form of "unplanned" speech. In more planned modes of speaking, the interlocutor might present such background information as a non-restrictive relative clause or adverbial clause embedded in a matrix clause. Or the interlocutor might present this information in a sequence of well-formed sentences that anticipate the major predication to be made. Before

developing further the role of Referent + Proposition constructions, we turn to this latter alternative, discourse, as a means of getting a referent known to an intended listener.

V. ALTERNATE FOREGROUNDING STRATEGIES

A. "ABOUT" QUESTIONS:

A speaker may draw the listener's attention to a particular referent in ways other than by the bald presentation of that referent as in "Referent + Proposition" constructions. For example, the speaker may introduce/re-introduce the referent through the use of an "about" question: "How about X?" "What about X?", where X represents some object, event, etc. (See also Gundel 1975). The response to this question provides a proposition relevant to X (the referent). Here, then, two or more separate utterances convey what is conveyed in "Referent + Proposition" utterances. For example, in (12) an individual named "Hogan" is introduced by J in an "about" question. He is identified in the subsequent three turns, at which point J is able to convey the relevant proposition ("he's a real bitchin' guy").

(12) GTS4:21

- REF
J: How about a guy named Hogan?
K: Bill Hogan?
K: Bill Hogan
K: Yeah I know him real well.
PROP
J: I do too he's a //real bitchin' guy.

In example (13), D asks his listeners to consider a particular type of person (rather than some specific individual):

(13) GTS5:37

(Talking about self-conscious people)

- REF
D: Well what about the guy gets up on the dance floor, who feels that he can't dance.
PROP
R: -He's scared.

B. DIRECTIVES TO LOCATE REFERENT:

One extremely common strategy for bringing a referent into the discourse either as an Alternative or as Particular Case is for the speaker to request that the listener locate the referent in memory or in the non-verbal context. Here the speaker makes use of one or more LOCATING VERBS, for example "look at" "see" "consider" "turn to" "watch out for" "remember" "know" "return to"

"check out" "take a glance at". Certain of these verbs are used to locate referents in both memory and visible environment of the talk taking place. For example, one can ask a listener to "look at" some individual not present, using "look" in a metaphorical sense and of course one can ask the listener to "look " at some object present in the physical setting.

Locating Verbs appear in a number of sentence modalities. For example, they may appear in an interrogative sentence, as in example (14):

(14) GTS4:28

REF

K: (D ju remember) Kouhalan?// (Fat kid two oh nine?)

J: Oh God, yeah, I know that guy.

PROP

K: Did Mc//McGee hates him.

J: That guy's insane we're drivin' down the freeway...

(15) GTS1-73

REF

L: Whaddya think of Paul

K: Paul the //quiet guy?

PROP

L: He was the quiet one who never said anything.

More widespread in conversational discourse is the use of a Locating Verb in the imperative mode. By far the most commonly used is the verb "look" or "look at".

(16) GTS4:12

REF

T: ... Look, if I have - for example Picasso.

PROP

I think he's an individual, who w-you may classify him as being neurotic or I don't know what, but I don't think he is, I think he's.....

REF

J: (Lookit) the guy who cut off his ear

R: That's another man

T: That was Van Gogh

PROP

J: Well, he was nuts, wasn't//he?

The Locating Verb "know" does not appear as such in the imperative, i.e. as "know X!". We find, however, that the texts are littered with the construction "you know" (y'know). We argue that "you know" sometimes operates as a directive to the listener to put himself in the state of knowing X, where X is some referent or proposition conveyed. That is, the speaker is directing the listener(s) to search in memory or in the immediate context for some

known/knowable X. In example (17), we find this use of "you know" intermingled with other locating verbs used to the same end.

(17) GTS1-73

(In discussion of picking fights in downtown Los Angeles)

A: I think-

R: Yeah that was much better man, You know an' REF

-Lookit these people come walkin down the street (Y'know dey oughta be-) Y'see dis executive, y'know wid his wife y'know

PROP

ou' come up t'him an 'chosed'im off, he

PROP

doesn't know what de hell's happened

Here we find the speaker making use of the Locating Verbs "know", "lookit", "see".

If the speaker feels that the listener may not know the information he wishes to convey, he may use "know" in either of two ways: He may ask if the listener knows the entity, proposition to be discussed. This does the work of making the listener aware that there is something that he does not in fact know and puts him in a state of readiness to receive the information (Heringer, pers. communication). In many cases, the speaker does not expect that the listener does know the bit of information he will convey. Indeed often the speaker makes it impossible for the listener to know the information at the time of the "Do you know?" information request. The speaker may simply ask "Do you know what?" or "Know what?". Here the listener is being informed that there is something he does not know. He is obliged to respond with the request for information "What?" or "No, what?" This in turn obliges him to attend to the subsequent response (Sacks 1966). The question "You know what?", then, is a powerful tool for a speaker who wishes to control the direction of the listener's attention. The question operates in much the same manner as the use of the "summons-response" adjacency pair (Schegloff 1972). A summons or calling out of someone's name is usually responded to with some query such as "Yes?" "What is it?" "What do you want?". Having asked this question the party summoned is obliged to attend to its response. Given that "you know" questions are such effective attention-getters, it is not surprising that they are employed to shift to a novel topic or introduce anecdote. Examples (15) and (16) illustrates such uses. Example (18) illustrates a not altogether successful use.

- (18) GTS1:10
 (in course of joke-telling session)
 L: You know what a cute one is? You wanna hear
 what a cute one is? What's purple and
 goes bam bam bam bam. A four door plum.
 (pause)
 K: Terrific.
- (19) GTS1:54
 (K tasting something)
 K: Aahh! ((whispered)) This is good.
 L: You know what my father keeps down in the
 basement? Cases of champagne.
 A: What?
 (K): (I din't hear.)
 L: Cases of cham//pagne.

A second alternative available to a speaker who feels the listener may not know what/who he is talking about is to assert that he, the speaker, knows this information, i.e. "I know X". Example (20) illustrates this strategy.

- (20) GTS1:20
 (In discussion of going to a psychiatrist at an early age)
 K: Oh he is a young'un hhh
 R: Maybe younger I don't really remember
 L: (If you think-) I know this guy who has been
 going since he was eight years old and he's
 even worse off than he-when he started.
 R: I thought you were going to say worse off than
 me hehhhhehh

The use of Locating Verbs to direct the listener's attention to something the speaker wants to talk about is common to two sets of speakers other than adult speakers of English. First of all, we find this strategy heavily employed by young children acquiring English. Atkinson (1974) reports that children at the one-word stage use verbs such as "see" and "look" to secure the attention of some co-present individual. Once the attention of the individual is captured, the child may go on to predicate something of the object of attention. This behavior is highly characteristic of the twins' conversations recorded by Keenan (1974). The transcripts from 33 months to 37 months are laced with demands and (later) requests that the conversational partner look at some object in the room. Often the speaker would repeat the directive over and over until the other child complied. (Keenan and Schieffelin 1975) Example (21) illustrates the character of such communications.

- (21) T, D,
 (T and D have been talking about a scratch on
 D's back when D abruptly notices a book on
 the floor)
 D: See it/ A B C/ See it/ See/ A B C / Look!/
 T: Oh yes/
 D: A B C in 'ere/

A second group of communicators who employ Locating Verbs in imperative and interrogative utterances to this end are users of American Sign Language. Friedman (1976) mentions that the sign equivalent for "know" can be used to establish a referent as a "topic" (ibid: 28). The sign - equivalent for the sentence "There's a train that runs between San Jose and San Francisco" begins with the sequence YOU KNOW-THAT/ TRAIN /. Similarly English sentences containing relative clauses may be glossed in sign by initially asking or telling the addressee to "remember" or "know" some referent and then predicating something of that referent, eg. "I saw the man who bought the dog" may be glossed in sign: REMEMBER MAN BOUGHT DOG? SAW HIM (INDEX). (Brandt, personal communication).

VI. LEFT -DISLOCATIONS OR DISCOURSES?

The strategies presented above represent discourse strategies for getting the listener to attend to and know a particular referent. The referent is introduced in one utterance, usually a directive. Subsequent utterances provide one or more predications concerning the referent. The major predication may or may not be preceded by background information relevant to the referent and its role in the predication.

We argue that Referent + Proposition constructions perform very similar communicative work. The uttering of the initial referent functions as a directive to attend to that referent. Subsequent propositions provide background information and/or a major predication concerning the referent. In this sense, the Referent + Proposition constructions look more like discourses (a sequence of communicative acts) than a single syntactically bound communicative act. In fact, it is possible to paraphrase many of the Referent + Proposition constructions by placing a locating verb before the initial referent. For example,

"But all grownups w-they do it to kids" = But (look at,
 consider) all grownups
 w-they do it to kids

Further support for an underlying locating verb is seen in cases in which a pronoun appears as the initial referent.

The pronoun appears in the objective case in English in these context (e.g. me, him, us, etc.). In these cases as well, the construction could be paraphrased with a locating verb:

Me, I don't wear stockings = (Look at) me, I don't wear stockings.

Him, he never studies. = (Look at him), he never studies.

That the Referent and Proposition function more like a discourse than a single construction is supported by formal characteristics as well.

1) PROSODIC BREAKS BETWEEN REFERENT AND PROPOSITION

We find that in most examples of Referent + Proposition that there is an intonational break between Referent and Proposition. In most cases, the referent is uttered with a slight rising intonation (represented by comma in transcript). This is then often followed by a pause or by a hesitation marker (e.g. uhh). In other cases the referent is expressed with a falling intonation followed by a brief pause.

2) INTERRUPTIONS

Another feature that supports the sequential nature of these constructions is the presence of interruptions between referent and subsequent propositions. We find interruptions of two sorts. First, there may be interruptions from a listener (Example (6)). Second, and more interesting, there may be self-interruptions. For example, we may consider the cases in which the speaker expresses the referent and then inserts background information about the referent before the main point as self-interruptions. (See examples (6), (7), (9), (10), and (11)).

3) LOOSE SYNTACTIC TIES

The initial Referent is not tightly tied to the subsequent proposition in the same way as sentential subjects are. (Keenan 1976). The initial referent does not control verb agreement for example. Further even the presence of a coreferential pronoun is not always manifest (example (2) (11)). We find several cases in which the initial referent is linked to the subsequent proposition simply by juxtaposition. For example:

(22) GTS3:62

(L has been talking about how her grandmother treats her father as small child)
L: Oy! my fa- my my-// my grandmother.
My father comes in the house "OH
MY SON MY SON"

In (22) the referent of "my grandmother" is linked to the subsequent proposition as utterances in a discourse are linked, i.e. by the maxim of relevance (Grice 1968).

We link the two expressions because they follow one another in real speech time and because we assume that speakers normally make their utterances relevant to prior talk, and because it makes sense to link them (given their content and our knowledge of the world). In such constructions, then, referents and propositions are linked pragmatically rather than syntactically.

In this paper we have displayed many of the discourse properties of Referent + Proposition constructions. We have argued that formally and functionally the expression of the initial referent and the expression of subsequent predications constitute more or less independent communicative acts. We say "more or less" because these constructions vary in the extent to which they are formally integrated. For example, (1) is prosodically and syntactically more cohesive than (22). But we may say the same for relations between separate utterances within a stretch of discourse. They may be more or less formally bound through the use of conjunctions, adverbs, anaphora and the like. When we contrast discourse with sentence, we are speaking of a continuum. Along this continuum, communicative acts are morpho-syntactically or otherwise formally linked to varying extents.

We may use such a continuum to characterize properties within and across languages. For example, written and spoken (particularly informal, spontaneous) modes of a language may differ with respect to discourse or sentential strategies for communicating (Duranti and Keenan, forthcoming). Furthermore, languages may differ from one another in the extent to which they rely on sequences rather than single sentences to convey information (c.f. Foley 1976). For example, topic -prominent languages (Li and Thompson 1976) may turn out to be discourse-oriented languages, whereas subject-prominent languages may turn out to be more sentence-oriented. Finally, the continuum may be useful in assessing changes over time within a language. For example, ontogenetic development of English is marked by a move away from discourse strategies for communicating towards greater reliance on sentences (i.e. greater reliance of syntax) (Keenan and Klein 1975, Keenan and Schieffelin 1976, Scollon 1974). Similarly diachronic changes may be marked by syntactization of earlier discourse constructions (c.f. Sankoff and Brown 1975).

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