Reference and inference

Reference = any linguistic form that enables the listener identify something.

Reference **is an act in which a speaker, or writer, uses linguistic forms to enable a listener, or reader, to identify something.**

Those linguistic forms are referring expressions, which can be **proper nouns** (for example, 'Shakespeare', 'Cathy Revueto', Hawaii'), **noun phrases which are definite** (for example, 'the author, 'the singer, 'the island'), **or indefinite** (for example, 'a man','a woman', 'a beautiful place'), and **pronouns** (for example, he', 'her', 'ir', 'them'').

*In shared visual contexts, those pronouns that function as **deictic expressions** (for example, "Take this'; 'Look at him!') **may be sufficient for successful reference**, but where identification seems more difficult, more elaborate noun phrases may be used (for example, "Remember the old foreign guy with the funny hat?').*

Reference, then, is clearly tied to the speaker's goals (for example, to identify something) and the speaker's beliefs (i.e. can the listener be expected to know that particular something?) in the use of language.

Inference= interpretation of speakers intended meaning.

For successful reference to occur, we must also recognize the role of inference. Because there is no direct relationship between entities and words, the listener's task is to infer correctly which entity the speaker intends to identify by using a particular referring expression.

Reference is not based on an objectively correct (versus incorrect) naming, but on some locally successful (versus unsuccessful) choice of expression.

Referential and attributive uses

It is important to recognize that **not all referring expressions have identifiable physical referents. Noun phrases** can be used **to identity a physically present entity**, but they can also be used to **describe entities that are assumed to exist, but are unknown, or entities that, as far as we know, don't exist** .

The point of this distinction is that **expressions themselves cannot be treated as having reference (as is often assumed in semantic treatments), but are, or are not, ''invested' with referential function in a context by a speaker or writer. Speakers often invite us to assume, via attributive uses, that we can identity what they're talking about, even when the entity or individual described may not exist. Some other famous members of that group are the tooth fairy and Santa Claus.**

Names and referents

The version of reference being presented here is one in which **there is a basic "intention-to-identify and a 'recognition-of-intention' collaboration at work.**

This process **need not only work between one speaker and one listener**; it **appears to work, in terms of convention, between all members of a community who share a common language and culture.**

That is, there is a convention that certain referring expressions will be used to identify certain entities on a regular basis. It is our daily experience of the successful operation of this convention that may cause us to assume that referring expressions can only designate very specific entities.

There appears to be a pragmatic connection between proper names and objects that will be conventionally associated, within a socio culturally defined community, with those names. Using a proper name referentially to identify any such object invites the listener to make the expected inference (for example, from name of writer to book by writer) and thereby show himself or herself as a member of the same community as the speaker. In such cases, it is rather obvious that more is being communicated than is said.

The role of co-text

It is misleading to think of reference being understood solely in terms of our ability to identity referents via the referring expression. The referring expression actually provides a range of reference, that is, a number of possible referents.

Our ability to identify intended referents actually depends on more than our understanding of the referring expression. It is aided by the linguistic material, or co-text, accompanying the referring expression.

The physical environment, or context, is perhaps more easily recognized as having a powerful impact on how referring expressions are to be interpreted.

Reference, then, is not simply a relationship between the meaning of a word or phrase and an object or person in the world. It is a social act, in which the speaker assumes that the word or phrase chosen to identity an object or person will be interpreted as the speaker intended.