

On Referential Distance in Written Texts

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Abstract

Apart from personal pronouns which are by far the most used referring expressions in English and Serbian, reference can be established and maintained using demonstratives. Their function is to refer to the location or distance of a person or an object. The aim of this paper is to examine reference realised by demonstratives with special regard to the restrictions written discourse imposes on their usage. The texts we used for analysis are narrative stories written in the two languages.

Keywords: demonstratives, reference, restrictions, English, Serbian.

Introduction

Although one of the commonest way to maintain once established reference is by means of personal pronouns, reference can also be maintained in other ways. Our aim in this paper is to show the reference made by demonstratives in narrative stories written in English and Serbian. Unlike Serbian, English distinguishes demonstrative pronouns and demonstrative determiners, each of which may perform referential function.

In the reference of a text demonstrative determiners fulfill their referential function if they occur with a noun, i. e. dependently, as in the example excerpted from our corpus:

When he reached for the gearshift *the boy* in front accommodated him by swinging his hairless knees out of the way. Mr. Kapasi noted that *this boy* was slightly paler than the other children.

(IoM, p. 33)

On the other hand, demonstrative pronouns may refer to an entity or the whole range of entities if they are used independently, without a noun, as in the following example which is also taken from our corpus:

He put down two embroidered place mats...and set out the plates...He put the ivy in the middle... He switch on the digital clock radio ...What's all *this*... (IoM, p. 17)

The demonstrative pronouns relate to the personal pronouns in much the same way as the demonstrative determiners are related to the definite article (Biber et al. 1999:347). Demonstrative pronouns have the same form as demonstrative determiners and can be singular (*this/that*) or plural (*these/those*).

Like the definite article and personal pronouns, demonstratives have definite meaning, and therefore their reference depends on the context shared by speaker/writer and hearer/reader (Quirk et al. 1985: 372). There are several characteristics of demonstrative pronouns:

Singular form may refer back to the whole text previously mentioned:

I wondered, too, what would happen if *suddenly his seven daughters were to appear on television, smiling and waving and blowing kisses to Mr. Pirzada from a balcony*. I imagined how relieved he would be. But *this* never happened.

(VV, p. 41)

Not only can they refer back but they can also refer forward to what is to be said:

Somehow, without saying anything, it had turned into *this*. Into an exchange of confessions — the little ways they'd hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves.

(IoM, p. 16)

Demonstrative pronouns may refer to plural referents:

He had never admired *the backs of his wife's legs* the way he now admired *those* of Mrs. Das...

(IoM, p. 60)

Plural forms can also refer to the whole range of previously mentioned things that have plural-like characteristics:

He had cheated on a college exam, ripped a picture of a woman out of a magazine. He had returned a sweater and got drunk in the middle of the day instead. These were the things he had told her.

(IoM, p. 19)

Although the usage of demonstrative pronouns is restricted when they refer to humans, the only instance where demonstratives can refer pronominally to human reference is in relational clause of the equative type where one element is supplying the identification of the others (Halliday, Hasan 1976: 63):

Do you want to know the woman who's fainted?

That's Michael Barrett's girlfriend... (VV, p. 50)

We have already said that one of the characteristics of demonstrative determiners is that they can be used in the form of singular or plural. The function of demonstrative determiners is to refer to a familiar referent, to inform about its quantity and its distance from the speaker/hearer. Performing that task they can be easily combined with countable and non-countable nouns alike.

Demonstrative determiners *this/these* and *that/those* are closely related to the meaning of the definite article in English. Even though the usage of the definite article is mostly restricted to countable nouns, the definite article can also occur with non-countable nouns and it can be sometimes replaced by a demonstrative determiner:

I beg your pardon, Mrs. Das, but why have you told me *this information*?"

(IoM, p. 42)

To show that demonstrative determiners are in a close relation with the definite article we give an example which shows that demonstrative determiner can be used after indefinite noun phrase which brings an entity in discourse for the first time:

Beyond the fields was a forest, and in *this forest*, there was a clear, blue lake.

(FT, p. 4)

No matter how logical it would be to expect the structure in which indefinite NP precedes a demonstrative NP, the reverse situation is also possible. This means that demonstratives are not restricted to reference maintenance only. They can also introduce an entity into a discourse as in the following text where the entity *guy* is referred back with the indefinite NP *a barefoot man*:

"Hey, do you mind stopping the car. I just want to get a shot of *this guy*." Mr. Kapasi pulled over to the side of the road as Mr. Das took a picture of *a barefoot man*...

(IoM, p. 33)

Moreover, demonstrative determiners may refer to animate and inanimate referents, which can be located in the vicinity of a speaker or far away.

But there is a rule that can be more or less applied generally: demonstrative determiner in a combination with a noun may refer to animate and inanimate entities while demonstrative pronouns usually refer to inanimate entities.

Although *this* and *that* anaphorically refer to what has previously been said, Halliday and Hasan (1976: 59) claim that *this* is more specific than *that* since *this* has the speaker as its point of reference while *that* has no particular reference point it is simply interpreted as *not this*. According to the same authors (1976:61) there are marked differences among different styles and varieties of English as regard their patterns of anaphoric usage. In narratives of a traditional kind such as children stories and ballads, we often find *that* where, in conversational narrative, a speaker would tend to use *this*, conveying a sense of immediacy and also of solidarity with the hearer, of shared interest and attention.

Lyons (1975) argues that the distance is what separates *this* and *that* from the definite article, which is quite neutral in showing distance. *This* refers to the things that are less distant and *that* to the things that are more distant, hence the distinction between these two demonstratives.

Demonstrative pronouns in Serbian have the adjectival characteristics and they usually occur with nouns but they can also stand alone as the independent part of a sentence. Serbian distinguishes several types of demonstrative nouns: *ovaj/ova/ovo*; *taj/ta/to*; *onaj/ona/ono*; *ovakav/ovakva/ovakvo*; *ovoliki/ovolika/ovoliko*; *onoliki/toliki*. They may refer to the people/entities that are in the vicinity of a speaker (*ovaj/ovoliki*), or the people being spoken to (*taj/toliki*) and the people that are absent (*onaj/onoliki*). Proximity is usually referred to by *ovaj/ova/ovo*, while the distance is referred to by *onaj/ona/ono*.

Moreover, the pronouns of this type in Serbian can refer to the qualitative characteristic of the entities being referred to:

Vaši očevi su bili hrabri, a i vi ćete biti takvi. (Stanojčić, Popović 1997: 91)

Types of reference

Demonstratives are specific though not rare referring expressions. In this paper we analysed their usage in narrative stories. One of the most striking facts we noticed is that demonstratives were usually restricted to the reference to inanimate entities. The reference they made was realized in two ways: by independent demonstrative pronouns and by dependent demonstrative determiners. The following lines show the types of reference demonstrative may establish.

a) Time reference

In this type of reference, demonstratives refer to time showing whether something is near or distant in time reference. Both languages share this feature:

... even though Shoba and Shukumar hadn't celebrated Christmas *that year*.

(IoM, p. 10)

Ta zima 1973. počela ja naglo s mrazovima...

(KSM, p. 17)

b) Anaphoric reference

In this type of reference, demonstratives occur within a NP and refer to the entity, that is to the whole range of entities that have been previously mentioned in the text:

The baby had been born dead... Her placenta had weakened and she'd had a cesarean... The doctor explained that *these things* happen.

(IoM, p. 11)

In Serbian language, the most frequent pronouns to form this type of reference are the pronouns *taj/ta/to*:

Vladar se morao još jednom vratiti natrag i pokušati sa *trećim vratima*... *Ta vrata* su ga odvela drugim hodnikom...

(CR, p. 79)

c) *Associative reference*

This type of reference presupposes that the interlocutor/listener will be able to establish associative relation between the antecedent and what follows it. In our example this type is illustrated by the verb *imagine* that is the antecedent and the NP with demonstrative determiner *these images*:

... *he imagined* a day when he and Shoba might need to buy a station wagon of their own, to cart their children. *He imagined himself* gripping the wheel, as Shoba turned around to hand the children juice boxes. Once *these images* of parenthood had troubled Shukumar.

(IoM, p. 11)

As the analysis shows, demonstratives are mostly used for referring to inanimate entities. Singular forms are much more frequently used than plural forms. Moreover, demonstratives primarily make anaphoric reference but we have shown they can make other types of reference. The following table shows the distribution of demonstratives in narrative stories.

Table1 *Distribution of demonstratives in narratives (English language)*

Demonstrative determiners				Demonstrative pronouns	
animate		Inanimate			
this	these	this	These	this	these
1	1	20	5	12	0
that	those	that	Those	that	those
0	1	21	10	7	1

In our corpus written in Serbian we observed the frequency of the three types of demonstrative pronouns and analysed the way they influence the establishment and maintenance of referential continuity in this type of narrative story. The most frequent is the pronoun *taj* when refers to singular inanimate entities. The least frequent is pronoun *ovaj* which refers to animate singular and plural entities. The table number 2 gives the distribution of demonstratives in written narratives n Serbian.

Table 2 *Distribution of demonstratives in narratives (Serbian language)*

Ovaj/ova/ovo				Taj/ta/to				Onaj/ona/ono			
animate		inanimate		animate		Inanimate		animate		inanimate	
sing	pl	sing	pl	sing	pl	sing	Pl	sing	pl	sing	pl
1	1	8	0	3	0	49	6	8	1	11	1

Speaking about the differences between the two languages it is interesting to mention that demonstratives from our Serbian corpus made other types of reference: situational, local, and cataphoric.

1) *Situational reference*

Although typical of spoken discourse, situational usage of demonstrative pronouns in Serbian occurs in narratives, in the form of the dialogue *with the choice of demonstrative determiner reflecting speaker's perception of distance* (Biber 1999: 273):

Ti dobro znaš šta hoću. Anđelar je na to besno bacio ubrus.

(KSM, p. 11)

2) *Local reference*

The example we provide shows the demonstrative pronoun used to denote the place the story is set in:

A na toj pučini sedeo je đavo.

(CR, p. 83)

3) Cataphoric reference

This type of reference is established through something following the demonstrative determiner. The demonstrative usually occurs independently and points to the things that are to be mentioned:

Kako se to zove? uboj, pečat, žig, ožiljak.

(CR, p. 11)

Conclusion

In both languages, English and Serbian, demonstratives can perform referential function and both languages chiefly use singular demonstratives to refer to inanimate entities. Even though demonstratives are related to the meaning of definite article which usually maintains reference, demonstratives can also introduce an entity into discourse.

English and Serbian share the ability to use demonstratives to make time and anaphoric reference. In time reference they show that something is near or distant in time while in anaphoric reference they refer back to the previous text.

In both languages demonstratives are used to show the proximity and the distance of a referent. In English demonstrative determiners are more frequently used than demonstrative pronouns. Estimating by frequency of occurrence, In Serbian the pronoun *taj* is the commonest demonstrative used for referring in this type of narrative.

Аннотация

За исключением личных местоимений являющимися наиболее часто используемым инструментом для произведения ссылки, в английском и сербском языках ссылка еще может быть достигнута и использованием демонстративов, указывающих на местоположение какого-то лица или объекта. Целью данной разработки является изучение того как производится ссылка на определенную сущность используя демонстративы, с особым акцентом на свободу и ограничения в связи с произведением ссылки демонстративами в двух языках. Текст, который служил нам для этого вида анализа является рассказом, написанным на упомянутых языках.

Ключевые слова: демонстративы, произведение ссылки, ограничения, английский язык, сербский язык.

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