

# 2 From reference . . .

## UNIT 4 REFERRING EXPRESSIONS

**Entry requirements** REFERENCE and SENSE (Unit 3). If you feel you understand these notions, take the entry test below. If not, review Unit 3 before continuing.

**Entry test** Answer the following questions:

- (1) Give an example of an expression that might be used to refer to the President of the United States in 2007.

.....

- (2) Give an example of an expression that could have variable reference.

.....

- (3) Give an example of an expression that always (in normal everyday conversation) has constant reference.

.....

- (4) Give an example of different expressions having one referent.

.....

- (5) Give an example of an expression that has no reference.

.....

- (6) Which of the following is a correct description of 'reference'? Circle your choice.

- (a) a relationship between expressions and other expressions which have the same meaning  
(b) the set of all objects which can potentially be referred to by an expression  
(c) a relationship between a particular object in the world and an expression used in an utterance to pick that object out

---

### Feedback

(1) George W. Bush, the former Governor of Texas, etc. (2) *my car, this page*, etc. (3) *England, the sun*, etc. (4) *the Morning Star* and *the Evening Star*, etc. (5) *and, if*, etc. (6)(c)

If you got at least 5 out of 6 correct, continue to the introduction. Otherwise, review Unit 3 before proceeding.

**Introduction** In this unit we develop the notion of reference (introduced in Unit 3), and consider more closely the range of expressions that speakers may use to refer to some object or person in the world. We will see that some expressions can only be used as referring expressions, some never can, and some expressions can be used to refer or not, depending on the kind of sentence they occur in. We introduce a notion (equative sentence) that is closely bound up with the idea of referring expressions.

**Definition** A REFERRING EXPRESSION is any expression used in an utterance to refer to something or someone (or a clearly delimited collection of things or people), i.e. used with a particular referent in mind.

**Example** The name *Fred* in an utterance such as ‘Fred hit me’, where the speaker has a particular person in mind when he says ‘Fred’, is a referring expression.  
*Fred* in ‘There’s no Fred at this address’ is not a referring expression, because in this case a speaker would not have a particular person in mind in uttering the word.

**Practice** Could the following possibly be used as referring expressions? Circle the answer of your choice.

- |   |          |
|---|----------|
| (1) <i>John</i>   | Yes / No |
| (2) <i>My uncle</i>                                     | Yes / No |
| (3) <i>and</i>  | Yes / No |
| (4) <i>the girl sitting on the wall by the bus stop</i> | Yes / No |
| (5) <i>a man</i>  | Yes / No |
| (6) <i>my parents</i>                                   | Yes / No |
| (7) <i>send</i>   | Yes / No |
| (8) <i>under</i>  | Yes / No |

---

**Feedback** (1) Yes (2) Yes (3) No (4) Yes (5) Yes, as in ‘A man was in here looking for you’. (6) Yes (*My parents* refers to a pair of things. For convenience at this point we use the idea of reference to include clearly delimited collections of things.) (7) No (8) No

**Comment** The same expression can be a referring expression or not (or, as some would put it, may or may not have a ‘referring interpretation’), depending on the context. This is true of indefinite noun phrases.

- Practice** (1) When a speaker says, ‘A man was in here looking for you last night’ is *a man* being used to refer to a particular man? Yes / No
- (2) So, in the above example, is *a man* a referring expression? Yes / No

- (3) When a speaker says, 'The first sign of the monsoon is a cloud on the horizon no bigger than a man's hand', is *a man* being used to refer to a particular man? *Yes / No*
- (4) Is *a man* in this example a referring expression? *Yes / No*
- (5) Is *forty buses*, used in 'Forty buses have been withdrawn from service by the Liverpool Corporation', a referring expression? *Yes / No*
- (6) Is *forty buses*, used in 'This engine has the power of forty buses', a referring expression? *Yes / No*

---

Feedback	(1) Yes (2) Yes (3) No (4) No (5) Yes, assuming that the speaker has 40 specific buses in mind (6) No
----------	---

**Comment** In the above examples the linguistic context often gave a vital clue as to whether the indefinite noun phrase was a referring expression or not. But it does not always give a clear indication.

**Practice** Are the following referring expressions? (Imagine normal circumstances for the utterance.)

- (1) *a Norwegian*, used in 'Nancy married a Norwegian' *Yes / No*
- (2) *a Norwegian*, used in 'Nancy wants to marry a Norwegian' *Yes / No*
- (3) *a car*, used in 'John is looking for a car' *Yes / No*
- (4) *a man with a limp*, used in 'Dick believes that a man with a limp killed Bo Peep' *Yes / No*
- (5) *a man with a limp*, used in 'A man with a limp killed Bo Peep' *Yes / No*
- (6) *a swan*, used in 'Every evening at sunset a swan flew over the house' *Yes / No*

---

Feedback	(1) Yes (2) Yes and No: the sentence is ambiguous. It depends on whether the speaker has in mind a particular person whom Nancy wants to marry. (3) Yes and No: the sentence is ambiguous. It depends on whether the speaker has a particular car in mind. (4) Yes and No (5) Yes, it can be. (6) Yes and No
----------	--

**Comment** All of the ambiguities in the above examples could in fact be resolved by the use of the word *certain* immediately following the indefinite article *a*, as in, for example: 'Nancy wants to marry a certain Norwegian' or 'John is looking for a certain car'.

All of the above examples involve indefinite noun phrases. It is clear that, given our definitions, which allude to what is in the mind of the speaker on a particular occasion of utterance, indefinite noun phrases can be referring expressions. Other definitions could yield different results. What the above

examples show is that, in our terms, whether an expression is a referring expression is heavily dependent on linguistic context and on circumstances of utterance.

We turn now to the case of definite noun phrases.

**Practice** Are the following referring expressions? (Imagine normal circumstances for the utterances.)

- |   |          |
|---|----------|
| (1) <i>John</i> in 'John is my best friend'   | Yes / No |
| (2) <i>he</i> in 'He's a very polite man', said by a husband to his wife in a conversation about their bank manager | Yes / No |
| (3) <i>it</i> in 'It's sinking!' used in a conversation about a battleship which has just been attacked             | Yes / No |
| (4) <i>the man who shot Abraham Lincoln</i> in 'The man who shot Abraham Lincoln was an unemployed actor'           | Yes / No |

---

**Feedback** (1) Yes (2) Yes (3) Yes (4) Yes

**Comment** These straightforward examples show how definite noun phrases of various kinds, proper names (e.g. *John*), personal pronouns (e.g. *he*, *it*), and longer descriptive expressions (as in question (4)) can all be used as referring expressions. Indeed, definite noun phrases such as these most frequently are used as referring expressions. But, even with definite noun phrases, there are examples in which they are not (or not clearly) referring expressions.

**Practice** Are the following expressions referring expressions?

- |   |          |
|---|----------|
| (1) <i>he</i> in 'If anyone ever marries Nancy, he's in for a bad time' (meaning that whoever marries Nancy is in for a bad time)   | Yes / No |
| (2) <i>it</i> in 'Every man who owns a donkey beats it'   | Yes / No |
| (3) <i>the person who did this</i> in 'The person who did this must be insane', spoken by someone on discovering a brutally mutilated corpse, where the speaker has no idea who committed the crime | Yes / No |
| (4) <i>Smith's murderer</i> in 'Smith's murderer must be insane', uttered in circumstances like the above, where the corpse is Smith's  | Yes / No |

---

**Feedback** (1) No, the speaker has no particular individual in mind as Nancy's possible future husband. (2) No, *it* doesn't refer to any particular donkey here. (3) Not such a clear case, but it could be argued that *the person who did this* is not a referring expression in this example. (4) Similarly, an unclear case, but again it could be argued that *Smith's murderer* is not a referring expression here.

**Comment** Such examples show that the notion ‘referring expression’ is not always easy to apply. Part of the difficulty encountered in the last two examples stems from the fact that it is not clear what we mean when we say that a speaker must have a particular individual in mind in order to refer. We shall not try to resolve this issue here. But note that in the case of definite noun phrases also, the question of whether they are used as referring expressions is very much dependent on the context and circumstances of use.

We now move to a different topic, starting with consideration of definite noun phrases, but linking eventually with some of the previous examples involving indefinite noun phrases.

- Practice**
- (1) Would the phrase *the President of the United States* used in a conversation about American politics in 2007 have the same referent as the expression *the Leader of the Republican Party* in the same conversation? Yes / No
  - (2) Take the schematic utterance ‘X hasn’t a hope of winning the next election’. If we replace X by either ‘the President’ or ‘the Leader of the Republican Party’, will the two resultant utterances be equivalent in meaning, i.e. both describe exactly the same state of affairs? (Assume still the context of a conversation about American politics in 2007.) Yes / No
  - (3) Assume a situation in which John is standing alone in the corner. Would *John* and *the person in the corner* refer to the same individual in a conversation about this situation? Yes / No
  - (4) In the conversation about the situation in which John is alone in the corner, would the following two utterances make exactly the same claim?  
‘John looks as if he’s about to faint’  
‘The person in the corner looks as if he’s about to faint’ Yes / No

---

**Feedback** (1) Yes (2) Yes (3) Yes (4) Yes

**Comment** Normally, one expects that utterances which differ only in that they use different expressions referring to the same thing (or person) will have the same meaning, as in the above examples. Indeed, this normally is the case. But there is a class of exceptions to this generalization. This is the class of examples involving opaque contexts.

**Definition** An OPAQUE CONTEXT is a part of a sentence which could be made into a complete sentence by the addition of a referring expression, but where the addition of different referring expressions, even though they refer to the same thing or person, in a given situation, will yield sentences with DIFFERENT meanings when uttered in a given situation.

**Example** The incomplete sentence *Laura Bush thinks that . . . is a genius* constitutes an opaque context, because, even in a conversation about American politics in 2007, the following two utterances would make different claims:

A: 'Laura Bush thinks that the President is a genius'

B: 'Laura Bush thinks that the Leader of the Republican Party is a genius'

If, for example, Laura Bush believes erroneously that the President is not the Leader of the Republican Party, then A and B will mean different things.

- Practice**
- (1) In a conversation about a situation where John is standing alone in the corner, do 'John' and 'the person in the corner' have the same referent? Yes / No
  - (2) Consider the following two utterances:  
'Dick believes that John killed Smith'  
'Dick believes that the person in the corner killed Smith'  
Assume that Dick does not know that John is the person in the corner; could one of these two utterances be true and the other false? Yes / No
  - (3) Is *Dick believes that . . . killed Smith* an opaque context? Yes / No
  - (4) The Morning Star is the Evening Star: they are both in fact the planet Venus. Assuming that Nancy does not know this, do the following make the same claim about Nancy's wishes?  
'Nancy wants to get married when the Morning Star is in the sky'  
'Nancy wants to get married when the Evening Star is in the sky' Yes / No
  - (5) Is *Nancy wants to get married when . . . is in the sky* an opaque context? Yes / No
  - (6) Imagine a situation in which the last banana on the table is the prize in a game of charades, but that Gary, who came late to the party, is not aware of this. Do the following make the same claim in this situation?  
'Gary took the last banana'  
'Gary took the prize' Yes / No
  - (7) Is *Gary took . . .* an opaque context? Yes / No

---

**Feedback** (1) Yes (2) Yes (3) Yes (4) No (5) Yes (6) Yes (7) No

**Comment** The term 'opaque' is especially appropriate because these contexts seem to 'block our view' through them to the referential interpretations of referring expressions.

Notice that opaque contexts typically involve a certain kind of verb, like *want*, *believe*, *think*, and *wonder about*. Note that it was often in the context of

such opacity-creating verbs that indefinite noun phrases could be ambiguous between a referring and a non-referring interpretation, as in ‘Nancy wants to marry a Norwegian’.

Turning away now from the question of opacity, and back to the more basic notion of referring expressions, we define a further notion, that of equative sentence.

**Definition** An EQUATIVE SENTENCE is one which is used to assert the identity of the referents of two referring expressions, i.e. to assert that two referring expressions have the same referent.

**Example** The following are equative sentences:

*Tony Blair is the Prime Minister*

*That woman over there is my daughter’s teacher*

**Practice** Are the following equative sentences?

- |   |          |
|---|----------|
| (1) <i>John is the person in the corner</i>                     | Yes / No |
| (2) <i>Henry the Eighth is the current President of the USA</i> | Yes / No |
| (3) <i>Cairo is not the largest city in Africa</i>              | Yes / No |
| (4) <i>Cairo is a large city</i>                                | Yes / No |
| (5) <i>Dr Jekyll is Mr Hyde</i>                                 | Yes / No |
| (6) <i>Ted is an idiot</i>                                      | Yes / No |

---

<b>Feedback</b>	(1) Yes (2) Yes, equative sentences can be false. (3) No (4) No, this sentence does not state identity of reference. (5) Yes (6) No
-----------------	---

**Comment** A feature of many equative sentences is that the order of the two referring expressions can be reversed without loss of acceptability.

**Example** *The largest city in Africa is Cairo*  
*Cairo is the largest city in Africa*

**Comment** The ‘reversal test’ applied here is not a perfect diagnostic for equative sentences, however. In *What I need is a pint of Guinness*, *a pint of Guinness* is not a referring expression, because a user of this sentence would not have any particular pint of Guinness in mind, but the sentence is nevertheless reversible, as in *A pint of Guinness is what I need*. And the sentence *That is the man who kidnapped my boss* definitely is equative, but it is not reversible, as *The man who kidnapped my boss is that* is unacceptable.

---

**Summary** At first sight the notion of reference as a relation between expressions used in utterances and people and objects in the world seems straightforward enough. But stating simple generalizations about when an expression is actually a referring expression and when it is not, is, to say the least,

difficult. Both indefinite and definite noun phrases can be ambiguous between referring and non-referring interpretations, with the appropriate interpretation being highly dependent on linguistic context (i.e. the surrounding words) and the circumstances of the utterance. The existence of opaque contexts also provides interesting complications to the contribution of referring expressions to meaning.

### Unit 4 Study Guide and Exercises

**Directions** After you have read Unit 4 you should be able to tackle the following questions to test your understanding of the main ideas raised in the unit.

- 1 You should understand these terms and concepts from this unit:  
     referring expression                      opaque context  
     indefinite noun phrase                  equative sentence  
     definite noun phrase

- 2 Which of the following could be used as referring expressions? Be able to explain why or why not.

- |             |                   |
|-------------|-------------------|
| a my table  | e or              |
| b a unicorn | f Mary            |
| c no love   | g a book          |
| d travel    | h Abraham Lincoln |

For sentences 3–6 below decide whether the italicized noun phrases are referring expressions or not, and explain why (or why not). If the sentence is ambiguous explain why it is ambiguous.

- 3 His father married *a dancer*
- 4 John wants to marry *a dancer*
- 5 *The whale* is the largest mammal
- 6 *The man who shot Kennedy* was Lee Harvey Oswald
- 7 Explain the ambiguity in: *I am looking for a pencil*
- 8 Create a set of circumstances under which the sentence *Dan believes that . . . signed the bill* is an opaque context. Use the referring expressions *George W. Bush* and *the President of the United States* in your answer.
- 9 Which of the following are equative sentences? Explain why.
  - a Fred is the man with the gun
  - b William the Conqueror is the current King of England
  - c Detroit is a nearby city
  - d Mary is a genius
  - e A box of cookies is what I would like
  - f Detroit is not the largest city in the USA



- 10 Consider the sentence *It's a tree*. Assume that this sentence is uttered by a particular person on a particular occasion to pick out a particular tree. Briefly explain how each of the following technical terms introduced so far in this book apply to the utterance of this example sentence: sentence, utterance, reference, referent.