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REFERENCE AND INFERENCE

Reference

In discussing deixis, we assumed that the use of words to refer to people, places and times was a simple matter. However, words themselves don't refer to anything. People refer. We have to define reference as an act by which a speaker (or writer) uses language to enable a listener (or reader) to identify something. To perform an act of reference, we can use proper nouns (Chomsky, Jennifer, Whiskas), other nouns in phrases (a writer, my friend, the cat) or pronouns (he, she, it). We sometimes assume that these words identify someone or something uniquely, but it is more accurate to say that, for each word or phrase, there is a "range of reference." The words Jennifer 128 The Study of Language or friend or she can be used to refer to many entities in the world. As we observed earlier, an expression such as the war doesn't directly identify anything by itself, because its reference depends on who is using it. We can also refer to things when we're not sure what to call them. We can use expressions such as the blue thing and that icky stuff and we can even invent names. For instance, there was a man who always drove his motorcycle fast and loud through my neighborhood and was locally referred to as Mr. Kawasaki. In this case, a brand name for a motorcycle is being used to refer to a person.

Inference

As in the “Mr. Kawasaki” example, a successful act of reference depends more on the listener/reader’s ability to recognize what the speaker/writer means than on the listener’s “dictionary” knowledge of a word that is used. For example, in a restaurant, one waiter can ask another, Where’s the spinach salad sitting? and receive the reply, He’s sitting by the door. If you’re studying linguistics, you might ask someone, Can I look at your Chomsky? and get the response, Sure, it’s on the shelf over there. And when you hear that Jennifer is wearing Calvin Klein, you avoid imagining someone called Calvin draped over poor Jennifer and recognize that they’re talking about her clothing. These examples make it clear that we can use names associated with things (salad) to refer to people, and use names of people (Chomsky, Calvin Klein) to refer to things. The key process here is called inference. An inference is additional information used by the listener to create a connection between what is said and what must be meant. In the Chomsky example, the listener has to operate with the inference: “if X is the name of the writer of a book, then X can be used to identify a copy of a book by that writer.” Similar types of inferences are necessary to understand someone who says that Picasso is in the museum, We saw Shakespeare in London, Mozart was playing in the background and The bride wore Giorgio Armani.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN REFERENCE AND INFERENCE

Reference is an act in which a speaker or writer, uses linguistic forms to enable a listener or reader to identify something. Inference is connecting prior knowledge to text based information to create meaning beyond what is directly stated. *Reference is the symbolic relationship that a linguistic expression has with the concrete object or abstraction it represents. Inference is the conclusion you draw from what you have observed. *The choice of one type of referring expression rather than another seems to be based, to a large extent, on what the speaker assumes the listener already knows. Inferring is to conclude/to guess and understand the situation after observation*

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It is important to recognize that not all referring expressions have identifiable physical referents. Indefinite nouns phrase can be used to identify 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, do not exist’

In inference, we must have the object/situation so that we are able to draw conclusion and understanding.