

NULL REFERRING EXPRESSIONS IN A CONVERSATIONAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

Two contexts where null referring expressions seem to be the most appropriate form for tracking referents in Persian conversation are discussed in this paper. The null referring expression is the unmarked form of tracking referents in both contexts. One context is where a referent acts as the protagonist of the discourse and has a role of primary importance. The other context is where there is a general schema in the sense discussed by Fillmore (1975), Prince (1981) and Chafe (1987). In these contexts, however, where Persian speakers' preference is for null referring expressions, English speakers' preference is for a pronominal form.¹

1. Introduction

In English conversation, a topic is usually introduced by a full NP and is maintained mainly by pronominal forms. Similarly, in Persian conversation, the topic is generally introduced by a full NP. In the rest of the conversation, however, the continuity of the topic is maintained through the use of null referring expressions. Null referring expressions, which in this paper are taken as the non-occurrence of an overt nominal or pronominal form, are found to be basic to referent tracking in Persian conversation, being the commonest way of maintaining topic continuity in discourse in this language.

2. Data

The data for this study come from ordinary dialogues, on general, everyday issues. The data consist of 12 conversation settings between 12 pairs of friends or spouses. The Persian data were audio-taped from native speakers who had been living in Australia for under two years at the time of recording. They were all adult speakers whose ages range between 30-40 years, the average age being 35. The total data analysed for the purpose of referent tracking is over 5000 intonation units (IUs). The IU, demarcated by pauses, is the unit of analysis in this study. Pauses occurring at the start of turns are thus not marked, unless they are of longer than expected length, as shown in the examples in the sections that follow. Chafe (1987, 1994), considering IUs to be the basic unit of spoken discourse, claims that there is at least one piece of given information and up to one new piece of information in most IUs in English.

Comparison will be made with English conversation in the course of the discussion. The English data were either tape recorded from Australian native English speakers, or were taken from sources which are directly acknowledged after each example.

3 Null referring expressions as the unmarked form in conversation

Generally, null referring expressions represent the unmarked form in Persian conversation (Shokouhi 1996, to appear). When, consequently, we find a free form NP or pronoun, the situation calls for a syntactic, discourse or pragmatic explanation, as this use is considered marked. In conversation, it is the speaker and his/her relation to the hearer, as well as the context, that determine which form, marked or unmarked, is appropriate to that context.

The following example is one where continuity of the topic is maintained throughout most of the rest of the conversation. The brackets enclosing the English pronouns in the example

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indicate null referring expressions in Persian.² (The relevant referents in this and following examples are shown in bold.)

- (1) a. B: *rästi äqä-ye Mehrabän dige raft/?*
 really Mr. Mehraban yet went
 ‘by the way, did Mr. Mehraban leave?’
- b. A: *oun ham,*
 he also
 ‘well, he’
- c. B: *dige ne-mi-yäd/?*
 anymore NEG-IMPF-come
 ‘doesn’t (he) come back’
- d. A: *na dige raft,*
 no just went
 ‘no (he)’s left for good’
- e. *..parirouz resid,*
 the day before yesterday arrived
 ‘(he) arrived (there) the day before yesterday’
- f. *..bal?id dost-am o did-e boud,*
 then friend-1GEN RA saw-PRF was
 ‘(he) had also seen my friend’
- g. B: *ähä,*
 INTRJ
 ‘yes’
- h. A: *oun chiz ni ham däd-e boud be-esh,*
 that thing RA also gave-PRF was to-3ACC
 ‘(he)’d also given those things to him’
- i. B: *mi-gof barä-esh rahat boud/,*
 IMPF-said3SG.AG for-3GEN easy was
 ‘did (he) say (it) was easy to find (your friend)?’
- j. A: *..äre mi-goft äre,*
 yes MPF-said-3AG.SG yes
 ‘oh yes, (he) said (it was easy)’
- k. *vali xob/,*
 but well
 ‘but, well’
- l. *..qarär boud be-r-e donbäl-e ye, kär-e*
 supposed was PAR-go-3SG.AG after-EZ one work-EZ
 dig-am
 another-1GEN
 ‘(he) was also supposed to do some other thing for (me)’
- m. *mesinke na-reside-e,*
 DS.MRK NEG-reached-3PRF
 ‘apparently, (he) hasn’t got the time’

² (See appendix for transcription conventions, abbreviations and phonetic notations.)

The introduction of the referent in this conversation is encoded as *Mr Mehraban* in NP and pronominal form *oun* in IUs (a) and (b) respectively. Except for the first unit which is used to introduce the topic, there are 10 IUs which are related to the main referent, namely Mr Mehraban, and are involved in its tracking. Out of these 10, eight employ null referring expressions, one uses an NP, and one uses a pronoun. This is a sample of a long text with little interference from other topics. It indicates that the primary source of referent identification is through null referring expressions, and that this is the unmarked way of referent tracking in Persian. Nominal and pronominal forms are marked, and their occurrences are generally due to some and pragmatic reasons (Shokouhi 1996, Chapter 7).

On the basis of the Persian data studied here, once a referent is introduced in the conversation, it is usually immediately established, to use Geluykens' (1992) term, via a pronominal form of that referent or the same nominal form. In example (1), following JU (a) which introduces the referent, IU (b) appears with the pronominal form *oun*, 'he'. This pronominal form, following Geluykens (1992:33,154), is used for the sake of 'establishment' of the referent as a provision for the continuation of the topic. Geluykens (1992) has found with his English data that when a referent is introduced in conversation, it is usually in the form of an NP, followed by an 'acknowledgment' stage by the hearer, followed by a third stage which he calls 'establishment'. Sometimes, however, the second stage can be missing, which is what we see in the example above.

3 1 Major, minor and tertiary characters and the role of null referring expressions

In conversation, referents may be classified into three types: primary (or major), secondary (or minor) and tertiary. Each of these referents has characteristics and can be assigned one of these labels according to its maintenance throughout the discourse. The first type, 'primary characters', are those that are mentioned through the whole conversation. The second type, 'secondary characters', are those that are brought into the conversation to subsequently join the primary characters. The last type, 'tertiary characters', are the least significant because their appearance is minimal. They usually come into the discussion because of some specific reason, such as being an example of an event a speaker is describing, or having some general relation to the primary or secondary character. It is the primary characters that concern us here.

The thematic element which initiates the main action in the discourse remains as the primary or main character of the conversation. The main character or the protagonist of a particular episode in conversation is typically referred to by null referring expressions in subsequent mentions. This is similar to Givón's (1983) hypothesis that the main action is maintained by zero anaphora. In the following rather long example, the referents can mostly be traced in null form. Some of the IUs, despite mentioning the main referent, have been omitted to save space. This conversation concerns a book on Persian grammar, based on Halliday's early model of 'Scale and Category Grammar'.

- (2) a. G: *in!*,
this
'this'
- b. *..ketäb-e Bäteni ro ke man mi-xound-am,*
book-EZ Bateni RA that I IMPF-read-1SG.AG
'Bateni's book that I was reading'
- c. *..in xaili qadimi-ie hä!*,
this very old-3SG.AG INTRJ
'this is pretty old'

((one IU follows))

- d. ..rouye oun,
on that
'on that'
- e. ..besaläh maqoule-ie chiz-e,
DS.MRK category-EZ thing-3SG.AG
'(it) is on the category of ... what's his name'
- f. ..Halliday has,
Halliday is
'(it)'s on Halliday's category'
- g. ..mäle= bist o panj säle pish-e,
belong twenty and five year ago-3SG.AG
'(it) is about twenty five years old'

((two IUs follow one of which uses agreement to refer to 'the book'))

- h. ...säle chehel o hasht nevesht-e/,
year forty and eight wrote-3PRF
'(he) wrote (it) in 1969'
- i. ..ketäb-e ro,
book-DEF RA
'the book, I mean'
- j. H: tajdide chap shod-e?,
revision print became-3SG.AG
'has (it) been revised?'
- k. G: do bär,
two time
'twice'

((three IUs follow one of which refers to 'the book'))

- l. man fek mi -kard-am jadid-e,
I think IMPF-did-1SG.AG new-3SG.AG
'I thought (it) was a recent work'

((eleven IUs follow, two of which use agreement to refer to 'the book'))

- m. kär-e bozorg-i boud-e,
work-EZ big-IND was-PRF
'the work has been great'

((seven IUs follow none of which refers to 'the book'))

- n. H: kär-e jäleb-i boud-e,
work-EZ nice-IND was-PRF
'the work has been very good'
- o. G: va hanouz ham,
and still also
'and still'
- p. ..etebär där-e ha,
valid have-3SG.AG INTRJ
'(it) is valid'

((two lust follow))

- q. ..*kär-e* *tamiz-i* *boud-e*,
 work-EZ clean-IND was-3PRF
 ‘the work has been nice’

The referent of primary importance in this conversation encoded as *Bateni’s book* is introduced in IUs (a) and (b). There are 43 IUs in this text some of which have been omitted. Except for the first referring expression which is used to introduce the topic, there are 15 His which are involved in the tracking of the main referent. Out of these 15, ten employ null referring expressions, four use NPs, and one uses a pronoun. This is a sample of a long text with little interference from other topics. The use of null referring expressions shows that this is the unmarked way of tracking referents in Persian when the topic is of primary importance. Nominal and pronominal forms are marked, and their occurrences are generally due to discourse and pragmatic reasons, which will be discussed below.

In IU (c) the speaker uses the deictic pronoun *in*, ‘this’, as a reference to the NP already established in (b), *ketäb-e Bäteni*, ‘Bateni’s book’. He uses this deictic form to emphasise the establishment of the referent. The emphasis is also shown by rising intonation at the end of the same IU. The speaker intends to show that the statement he is making is a surprising fact. Seven His later, in (i), he uses the NP *ketäb-e ro*, ‘the book’, in object form. In the previous IU, (h), he had used a transitive verb *nevesht-e*, ‘(he) had written’ for which he

provides the object in (i). Although the objects of transitive verbs are often omitted in Persian conversation, the speaker feels it is necessary to mention the object at this point. This helps the hearer to keep track of the relevant referent. This ‘necessity’ strategy is also evident in IUs (m) and (n) which are a few IUs away from the last reference to ‘the book’. In both IUs (m) and (n), the NP *kär-e*, ‘the work’, occurs turn initially. The last mention of the word *kär-e*, ‘the work’, in JU (q) terminates the discussion about the topic.

In English, on the other hand, speakers mainly use pronouns for tracking referents of primary importance. As shown in example (3), both speakers D and G frequently use *she* and *her*, as seen in IUs (c), (e), (g-i), (1), (n) and (p), to keep track of the referent mentioned in IU (a), namely speaker D’s wife.

- (3) a. D: my wife realizes that I’m,
 b. .. ha- have changed and matured,
 c. ..and she would give me that chance,
 d. ..you know,
 e. ..[to go] back to her,

((one IU follows))

- f. ..and try to make our life work together,

((three IUs follow))

- g. ..I gotta prove it to her,
h. ..and I got to leave her on her own,
i. ..let her see,
j. ..you know.
k. G: yeah,
l. D even if she goes out with other men,
m. ..or dates other men

((two IUs follow))

- n. ..if she does feel any attraction towards anybody else,
- o. ..I'll never know.
- p. G: then she'll know what her good thing was.
- q. D yeah.

(Du Bois *et al.* 1992:144)

3.2 Null referring expressions in a general schema context

Schemas, scripts or frames in relation to characters in discourse have been discussed in detail in the literature. (See especially Goffman 1974; Fillmore 1975; Grimes 1975; Gumperz 1982; Hinds 1985; Chafe 1987 and Langacker 1987. In Fillmore's words (1975: 123) a frame is the combination of some particular 'schemata' of concepts which 'link together as a system and impose structure or coherence on some aspect of human experience, and which may contain elements which are simultaneously parts of other such frameworks.'

Fillmore further points out that people associate certain 'scenes' such as interpersonal interactions, scenarios, beliefs and experiences with particular linguistic 'frames' and these two, frames and scenes, actually activate one another (1975:123). When a general frame or schema is introduced, a series of inferable smaller schemas (Prince 1981) will be derivable from the original broad schema. The speaker usually assumes the hearer can instantaneously build up a frame for each schema and place in it many relevant referents. The first (or broad) schema may, from a cognitive point of view, be taken as new information and the derivable ones may be considered accessible according to Chafe (1987:29-30).

Speakers often assume that by creating some broad schema, their hearers are able to share with them many of the features that schema possesses. For instance, if the topic of a particular conversation concerns, for example, an institution such as a *bank*, the hearer is required to understand and be able to infer from that context the people and activities with which it is associated. Linguistically, in any such situation, speakers usually first introduce the institution, for instance, in full NP form, and assume their hearers open a cognitive file for this referent and the environment in which the referent is located. Persian speakers will then start using null referring expressions for elements associated with that environment, (labelled 'inferables') by Prince (1981:236-237, 1992:304-305), without any prior mention of them. In English, for example, a speaker may begin with a word like *hospital* as a general concept and then use *they* in the immediately subsequent IUs to refer to *people in the hospital*. This is shown in the English example below where the word *they* is used to refer to doctors in a hospital although the word *doctor* is never overtly mentioned in the text.

- (4) a. M: but she thought she had a bladder infection,
- b. R: oh did she?

((4 IUs follow))

- c. M: but they didn't even do a urinalysis,
- d. ..which I think is ridiculous,

((5 IUs follow))

- e. R: because *they* did for Bill,
- f. ..*they* thought he had a kidney <x infection x>,
- g. ..but *they* never figured out what he had?

(Du Bois *et al.* 1992:197)

In this conversation, both speaker M in IU (c) and speaker R in IUs (e), (f) and (g) use *they* to refer to *doctors* who were involved in examining *the patient* in that particular hospital.

In Persian, although pronouns are sometimes used in such cases, the dominant pattern seems to be null referring expressions. In the conversation that follows, speakers M and R are talking about a *bank cheque* which was supposed to be deposited in M's account, but as yet, has not been.

- (5) a. M: *bānk ro goft-am be-toun/*,
bank RA said-1SG.AG to-2ACC
'did I tell you about the bank?'
- b. *..bāyesti cheque o,*
must cheque RA
'as for the cheque'
- c. G: *..be hesāb-am vāriz mi-kard-an,*
to account-1GEN pour IMPF-did-3SG.AG
'(they) must have deposited into my account'
- d. *..ke tā hālā na-kard-an\,*
that till now NEG-did-3SG.AG
'well, (they) haven't done **it** yet'
- e. R: *āre goft-e boud-i,*
yes said-3PRF was-2SG.AG
'yes, (you)'d already mentioned (that)'
- f. M: *ne-mi -doun-am chera hanouz na-rixt-an*
NEG-IMPF-know-1SG.AG why yet NEG-poured-3SG.AG
'(I) don't know why (they) haven't done (it) yet'
- g. R: *ehemālan gereftār-an,*
probably engage-3SG.AG
'probably (they) are busy'
- h. M: *dorost-e/ gereftār-an,*
right-COP engage-3SG .AG
'it is true that (they) are busy'
- i. *pas kar ma chi!*
then work us what
'what about me, then!'
- j. R: *belaxare anjām mi-d-an.*
eventually do I MP-do-3SG.AG
'well, (they)'ll do (it) eventually'

When speaker M in this conversation introduces the new referent *bank* in TU (a), he expects the hearer to open a new file for this. Having opened a general file, the hearer then understands that he has to open other small files which are in one way or another related to this referent. One small file can, for instance, pertain to a particular section in the bank where the clerk arranges cheques. The hearer is not expected to know all the people working in that department or that section. As long as he is aware of the presence of some people in that section, he will find adequate clues for partial identification of relevant referents. Therefore, in IUs (c-d), (f-h) and (j) both parties acknowledge that null referring expressions would sufficiently indicate the intended referent.

In such circumstances, the speaker usually builds up a general schema or frame to which s/he allocates a set of referents. The speaker then assumes that partial familiarity with those referents is sufficient for the hearer's purpose. This partial identification, as Du Bois (1980:233) asserts, is adequate for the conversation process. Knowing that the exact identification of the referent has little significance in the process of communication, the speaker leaves the new referent unmarked, and thus uses a null referring expression.

4. Conclusion

Null referring expressions, defined here as the non-occurrence of free form (pro)nominals, are found to be the unmarked form of referent tracking in Persian in two conversational contexts. A major source where there is ample use of null referring expressions is the context where a referent acts as the protagonist and has a role of primary importance in the conversation. In English, on the other hand, where the referent is used as protagonist, the unmarked form is pronominal. Likewise, English uses pronouns when a general schema is involved whereas Persian prefers null referring expressions.

A cross-linguistic study of these elements within a discourse framework can come up with some results that studies of sentence level syntax cannot achieve. It certainly shows differences in the two languages of Persian and English which may be useful not only for typological purposes but for educational goals as well. An issue that may require further investigation is to what extent the use of null referring expressions is relevant in a context of secondary or tertiary characters.

APPENDIX

Transcription notation, abbreviations, as well as phonetic notation are as follows:

=	lengthening of the preceding segment	[]	speech overlap
\	falling terminal pitch	(())	researcher's comments
/	rising terminal pitch	..	short pause, about 0.2 seconds
<xx>	unclear pronunciation	...	medium pause, about 0.5 seconds
-	truncated word		

ACC	accusative	INTRJ	interjection
AG	agreement	NEG	negative
COP	copula	PAR	particle
DEF	definite	PL	plural
DS.MRK	discourse marker	PRF	perfect tense
EZ	<i>ezāfe</i> or 'addition', as in possessive phrases marker	RA	direct object
GEN	genitive	SBJN	subjunctive
IMPF	imperfective	SG	singular
IND	indefinite		

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