

What's in a pronoun?

Ralph L. Rose

Abstract. In spite of the pervasiveness of pronouns in everyday speech and writing, they get relatively little explicit treatment in the language teaching curriculum. In this paper, I argue that more attention is warranted by showing some of the subtle but important ways that pronouns are used in speech and writing: some basic principles guiding how and when pronouns are used in discourse, how prosody and the use of pronouns interact, and some sociolinguistic aspects of pronouns that relate to how people view self and others. Practical ideas for how these facts can be applied in language teaching are discussed and should be of interest to both teachers and materials developers.

Introduction

What'd I ever do to you?
Nothing. It's what you did to her.
Her who? ... Oh, her.
- *Little Shop of Horrors*, 1986

Communication is the process of transmitting information from one agent to another. In human speech, this involves identifying entities—people, places, things, ideas—and then making propositions about those entities. Communication is successful to the degree that interlocutors agree that they are talking about the same entities. Given this, if interlocutors wish to communicate unambiguously, then it should follow that they would always use unambiguous forms of reference: That is, they would always use names or clear modifiers in order to pick out a unique entity. Yet, people often use potentially ambiguous forms of reference—pronouns, in particular—in all forms of communication. In fact, pronouns are among the most frequent lexical items in the English language with most forms of the first, second, and third-person pronouns among the top 100 items in many corpus word-frequency lists (cf., BNC: Leech, Rayson, and Wilson 2001). In spite of this, interlocutors seem to have little difficulty understanding who or what each other is talking about.

One task of the second language learner is to learn how to comprehend and use pronouns in the same way as native speakers. It is no surprise then, that pronouns get early treatment in most English language teaching curricula. A typical treatment might present the various forms of the pronouns in tabular form together with their translations into the L1. These might be accompanied by a number of examples and substitution exercises (where learners replace repeated noun phrases with appropriate pronouns) or interpretation exercises (where students interpret the intended referent of a particular pronoun). In this article, I argue that this is not enough. There is much evidence to show that pronouns have many more subtle and important features about them than their dictionary meanings. Pennycook (1994) made this argument in terms of the politics of pronouns—a topic I will return to below. However, I would like to further his effort by presenting some other practical aspects of pronoun use and argue that at least some of these features should inform and be integrated into the English language curriculum at the earliest stages. While a full treatment of pronouns is beyond the scope of this paper, I will review pronouns with respect to three key areas: discourse, prosody, and sociolinguistics.

Discourse and pronouns

Pronouns have long been described as cohesive elements of discourse (cf., Halliday and Hasan

1976), helping to hold a sequence of utterances together through interconnections. However, what has proved elusive over the years is finding a comprehensive, yet simple, explanation for how and when to use, say, 'it', instead of 'the dog' or 'Fido'. While it is fairly clear that an entity should already have been introduced into the discourse before it is referred to with a pronoun,¹ that alone is not sufficient reason to use a pronoun: Sometimes a definite noun phrase will be used, while other times, a full noun phrase or even name will be repeated. Given this state of affairs, it is no surprise then, that in English language teaching texts, little guidance has been offered to learners about how and when to use (or not use) pronouns. Oshima and Hogue (1991) offer the following advice in their textbook, *Writing Academic English*, 3rd Ed.

There is no fixed rule about how often to repeat key nouns or when to substitute pronouns. At the very least, you need to repeat a key noun instead of using a pronoun when the meaning is not clear. (Oshima and Hogue: op.cit.: 41)

Two comments can be made about this advice. First, in contrast to Oshima and Hogue's (op.cit.) assertion, there most certainly are fixed rules about the use of pronouns in text and this is attested by the consistent intuitions that native speakers show in various investigations of patterns of pronoun use (see e.g., Walker, Joshi, and Prince 1997). The greater challenge, though—and this may be what Oshima and Hogue (op.cit.) are trying to get at—is forming a coherent and comprehensive description of these rules, let alone one that can be applied in language teaching pedagogy. This has been more difficult. Nevertheless, native English speaker intuitions are reliable, if complex, in various experiments. This fact then leads to the second point which is that there is some circularity in Oshima and Hogue's (op.cit.) advice: How can learners know 'when the meaning is not clear', if they haven't yet developed the intuitions that are unique to English?² It seems the implicit pedagogical approach in much of the ELT world is to merely teach the dictionary forms of pronouns and then leave it to learners' internal learning mechanisms to eventually shape these intuitions.

The development of learners' intuitions might be accelerated by helping to draw the learner's attention to some of the more reliable observations that have been made about patterns of pronoun use in native speakers of English. In the following sections, I describe some of these observations and suggest how they may be addressed in language teaching.

Repeated reference

A necessary condition for using a pronoun is that the entity being referred to must have already been introduced in the discourse. In some cases, the oddity of not using a pronoun in this case is plainly obvious. Consider the following short discourse.

1. a. John went to the supermarket.
- b. John bought two fish.
- c. John cooked the fish for dinner.

While there is nothing wrong with the grammar of these sentences, when taken as a whole discourse, it sounds quite odd. If 'John' in (1b) and (1c) is changed to 'he', then the discourse improves markedly: It is clearly easier to read. This observation, sometimes called the 'repeated-name penalty' has been observed in several psycholinguistic experiments (Gordon *et al.* 1994). Furthermore, this problem shows up in the writing of early learners. The following text from the Japanese EFL learner corpus (JEFLL; Tono 2007) was written by a junior high school student and illustrates the problem.

Urashima Taro told some people about his trip. Some people was lach at him. So he was sad along. Then a boy stood near him. A boy said , "May I help you?" Urashima Taro told a boy about his trip. A boy said , "It is interesting to me." So they went to sea again. Their life was finish at there.

There are four references to a boy in this text and all of them use the same form: 'a boy'. Changing the second and third references to pronouns—'he' and 'him', respectively—improves the readability quite a bit (although the second one might be even better merely as a definite noun phrase, 'the boy'). The fourth one is a little more complex and sounds better as 'the boy'. I will deal with this more complex case shortly. However, note that even a simplistic approach to using pronouns (i.e., if an entity has already been introduced to the discourse, use a pronoun in subsequent references to it), improves the text considerably.

Discourse prominence

As noted above, the fact that an entity has been introduced previously in a discourse is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to use a pronoun in subsequent reference to that entity. Another important factor to discuss here is the influence of discourse prominence. This refers to the degree which entities are perceived to be more or less prominent at a given moment in the discourse. Another way to think of this is in terms of attention: At different points in a discourse, some entities are perceived as being closer to the centre of attention, while other entities are further from the centre. This particular idea has been studied by many researchers for quite some time (e.g., in Centering Theory: Walker, Joshi, and Prince op.cit., inter alia). The common thread through all of the research has been the idea that a pronoun should refer to the most prominent entity in the current discourse (excluding those entities which do not match the gender and number of the pronoun). From a pragmatic point of view, this is very sensible: Entities are placed in a prominent position so that more information can be efficiently passed about them. As such, using a pronoun here to refer to a prominent entity is economical because the speaker does not have to utter a long noun phrase and the listener doesn't have to process a long noun phrase, but can immediately interpret the pronoun as referring to the most prominent entity.

But how is prominence determined? This is a difficult question and while there are many proposed answers, there is no clear consensus. However, multiple factors are agreed to influence prominence. Let me briefly review some of them here in some detail.

Syntactic prominence. The structural position in which an entity is placed has been argued to be the most significant factor determining the entity's prominence. In some models of discourse prominence, syntactic prominence is the only factor. While there are different ways of describing it, in effect, entities which come earlier in a clause are more prominent than those which come later. Hence, entities in subject position are more prominent than those in object position and so on. For example, consider the following discourse.

2. a. John shoved Matt.
- b. Then he got angry.

Although we might be inclined to think that Matt would get angry after being shoved by John, the stronger intuition here is that John is the one who got angry. This is because after (2a), John is more discourse-prominent than Matt (i.e., subject > object).

Syntactic prominence is what explains the fourth instance of 'a boy' in the Urashima Taro story discussed above and extracted in revised form here.

3. Taro told him about his trip. The boy/He said , "It is interesting to me."

In the first sentence, 'Taro' is the most prominent. Therefore, when we read the second sentence, the pronoun 'He' would refer to Taro by default. But that's not the desired interpretation so in this case, a definite noun phrase, 'The boy', sounds much better.

Parallelism. Another factor which influences prominence—or perhaps more accurately, negates it—is parallelism across sequential utterances. If two sequential utterances are highly similar in structure, then there may be a preference to interpret a pronoun as referring to an entity in a parallel role, regardless of syntactic prominence. For instance, consider the following discourse.

4. a. John gave Bill a present.
b. Mary gave him a flower.

Although John is the most syntactically prominent entity (as the subject of (4a)), the pronoun in (4b) is more likely interpreted as referring to Bill. This is because the parallel structure between (4a) and (4b) causes a sort of alignment during processing such that Bill is consistently seen as the recipient. [Note: This analysis assumes that the pronoun is not prosodically stressed. If it is stressed, then interpretations change. This will be discussed in detail in the next major section of the paper.]

Rhetorical relations. The logical relations that connect ideas expressed in utterances has been referred to as rhetorical relations. One classification of rhetorical relations (Hobbs, 1979) categorizes them into three broad groups: 'resemblance' (i.e., showing similarity), 'contiguity' (e.g., including narrative sequences), and 'cause-and-effect' (showing causal relations among ideas or events). Different rhetorical relations may lead to different discourse prominence rankings. For instance, consider the following two short discourses.

5. John shoved Matt and then he punched him. (contiguity)
6. John shoved Matt because he punched him. (cause-and-effect)

In (5), the more likely interpretation is that John punched Matt. In this case, the contiguity relationship coincides with syntactic prominence to promote John as the most prominent in the discourse. However, in (6), the preferred interpretation flips: Matt punched John. Thus, the cause-and-effect relation seems to reverse or re-order the discourse prominence ranking.

Teaching approach

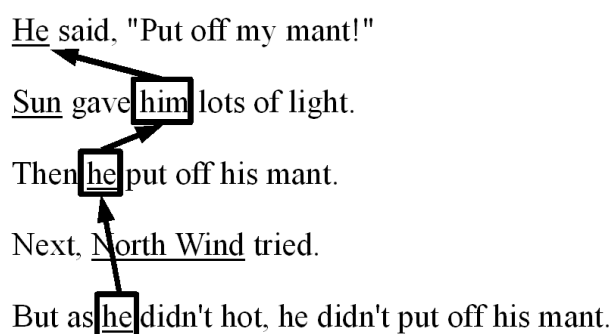
How can we help students begin to develop the subtle intuitions that native speakers have about using pronouns in discourse? I recommend addressing this by using a graphical approach during the re-writing phase of composition. After completing the first draft of a writing assignment, learners could be asked to review their writing (or others' writing) and evaluate whether their pronouns consistently point toward the most discourse prominent entity. Following is an illustration of how this may be done. First, assume the learner has just produced the following text (from Corpus of English by Japanese Learners; Asao 1999).

Once upon a time, there were Sun and North Wind. They quarrelled each other. Sun said, "I am stronger than you!" North Wind also said, "I am stronger than you!" Then they asked to the traveler which is strong. He said, "Put off my mant!" [i.e., cape] Sun gave him lots of light. Then he put off his mant. Next, North Wind tried. But as he

didn't hot, he didn't put off his mant. As a result, Sun was win!

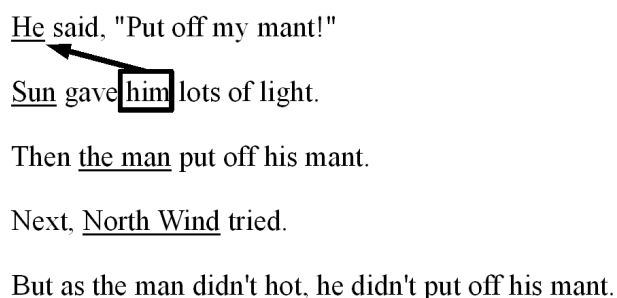
Next, learners should go through the text and first underline the most prominent entity in each utterance. In order to keep this simple, they can follow syntactic prominence only and underline the subject of the main clause. Next, they should mark the first pronoun in each utterance (multiple pronouns in an utterance add an element of complexity that could be avoided here) and draw arrows back to the nearest noun phrases which they corefer with. This is shown below for the last few sentences of the original text.

(Insert Figure 1 here)



After doing this, two problems are immediately noticeable: The pronouns in the third and fifth sentences are not pointing to the most prominent entities. The pronoun 'he' in the third sentence does not point to 'Sun' in the second sentence, and the pronoun 'he' in the fifth sentence does not point to 'North Wind' in the fourth sentence. In fact, this coincides well with intuitions about the passage: Reading the third sentence carefully, it feels at first like 'he' refers to 'Sun'. It's not until we reach the word 'mant' (cape) that this is clarified and then we must reanalyse the interpretation of the sentence. Similarly, 'he' in the fifth sentence feels at first like it should refer to 'North Wind'. However, the following words clarify that and again we must reanalyse the sentence accordingly. After identifying these problems with the text, the learner might then rewrite the text as follows:

(Insert Figure 2 here)



This procedure is relatively mechanical, yet forces learners to analyse their writing more carefully. There will probably be several unusual cases which the students will have to ask the teacher about. This is just fine, though, as it fosters a learner-motivated focus on form.

Prosody and pronouns

According to the OED Online and other dictionaries, the pronunciation of the third-person singular masculine pronoun 'he' is /hi/. While this is quite typically the pronunciation used by native speakers when 'he' is uttered in isolation, it is often not the pronunciation of the pronoun in context. The well-known child's word play shown in (7) would lose its effect if 'he' were pronounced as

shown in the dictionary.

7. Fuzzy Wuzzy was a bear. Fuzzy Wuzzy had no hair. Fuzzy Wuzzy wasn't fuzzy, was he?

Instead, 'was he' is pronounced /wəzi/ such that it rhymes with 'fuzzy' and is homophonous with 'Wuzzy'. To be precise, the /h/ is not pronounced. This process has been referred to as reduction (cf., Dauer 1992), and /i/ for 'he' has been described as a reduced form (or 'weak form'). What determines this reduction in form? A good way to explain this is in terms of the 'given-new' distinction in discourse structure (Clark and Haviland 1977).

Prosody serves to highlight 'new' information being introduced in the current utterance through the means of stress and intonation. Pronouns typically refer, on the other hand, to 'given' information (ideas and entities already introduced). This leads to two important observations about pronouns: first, they do not coincide with intonation peaks, and second, they are often reduced. Thus, consider the following sentence.

8. John won the race and then he celebrated.

A default reading of (8) would place intonation peaks on 'John', 'race', and 'celebrated', but not on 'he'. Furthermore, 'he' would be reduced: /then 'e CElebrated/. If, however, an intonation peak were put on 'he' and it is not reduced—/then HE celebrated/—the statement sounds quite odd³ because it is difficult to imagine what the new information is. However, if there happened to be some other male standing nearby in the context—perhaps an enthusiastic coach—then the hearer might interpret the pronoun as introducing this new entity to the discourse. This may require a little more effort on the part of the hearer and they may take more time to comprehend such sentences.

While the intended meaning of (8) above is recoverable even if the pronoun is stressed, other cases can be more difficult. Consider (9).

9. John shoved Matt and then he punched him.

If the second clause of (9) is spoken with stress on 'punched' and not on either pronoun—/then 'e PUNCHED 'im/—it is understood that John punched Matt. But if the pronouns are stressed and not reduced—/then HE punched HIM/—it is understood that Matt punched John. Now, if a learner were to pronounce the second clause with an intonation peak on 'punched', but no reduction in the pronouns—/then he PUNCHED him/—this would effectively send mixed signals. It is now not clear what the intended interpretation is and the listener would likely need to ask for clarification.

Teaching Approach

There are many pronunciation texts that talk about reduced forms, particularly when it comes to so-called function words including pronouns. However, even such a comprehensive pronunciation text as *Accurate English* (Dauer op.cit.) does not illustrate how (un)reduced forms in pronouns influence sentence interpretation. Because reduction of pronouns is so commonplace in the English language, learners at even early stages of language learning can benefit by becoming more aware of these forms. One suggestion might involve creating listening materials that include sentences like the /HE punched HIM/ examples above and then giving comprehension questions to focus learners' attention on the phenomenon.

It is important to note in this context that when presenting printed representations of what is to be understood as spoken texts, there is no guarantee that learners will read the text with the same

intonation pattern. Thus, caution should be taken when preparing such materials—especially for testing purposes—to ensure that the relevant portion of the text is unambiguous with respect to the possible interpretations of the pronouns. In short, aural materials would be more effective than printed materials.

With these facts in mind, various consciousness-raising activities could be offered which illustrate how pronouns are reduced and how reduction (or lack of it) can influence interpretation. This will better prepare them for when they encounter such forms in authentic situations. It should also prepare them to recover from error more quickly should they make a mistake in production or perception.

Sociolinguistics and Pronouns

In his discussion of the politics of pronouns, Pennycook (op.cit.) argues that all pronoun use is ultimately political because one's choice of pronoun (e.g., 'you people', 'we teachers') reveals a lot about two perspectives: One's self-concept and one's concept of others. In the same spirit, I'd like to look at two different pragmatic difficulties that arise with pronouns: one that restricts oneself and one that restricts others.

One fact about the second-person pronoun 'you' in English is that it implies nothing about social status. Unlike French 'tu' and Japanese 'anata' which are generally reserved for intimates, 'you' can be spoken to either intimates or non-intimates without consequence. Yet, people coming from such linguistic backgrounds as French and Japanese may struggle to master this free usage of 'you'. Occasionally, my Japanese students refer to me by name or by 'teacher' when a second-person pronoun would normally be optimal (e.g., 'Would teacher check my report?'). In this case, these learners are unnecessarily restricting themselves from lexical options with respect to a pragmatic constraint that doesn't exist in English. Explicit attention to this fact may be necessary to facilitate their removal of this constraint.

Closely tied to identity negotiation is the issue of gender. English pronouns provide some challenge here because there is no universally accepted non-gender-specific third-person singular pronoun (the prescriptive prohibition of singular 'they' persists). Add to that the current social and political climate in many English-speaking cultures in which gender is becoming more of a relative concept and one can see the potential for misunderstanding and miscommunication. For instance, when conversing with a male acquaintance about his romantic interest, 'she' or 'her' may not be reliable forms of reference. In this case, one would be unnecessarily restricting another's identity. So instead, a speaker must use other expressions like 'someone' or singular 'they'. But even these seem odd if they are used too much in a single conversation. So eventually, it is necessary to use some sensitive means to determine an appropriate gender. English L2 learners—perhaps most of all those who are preparing to study abroad in an immersion context—will need some preparation to learn how to navigate this potential mine field.

Teaching Approach

Fortunately, examples of problematic uses of pronouns based on gender or social status are not difficult to find by doing Internet searches on such keywords as 'pronoun', 'gender', and 'politics' which turn up lots of interesting cases. For instance, on a recent search, the first page of results contained a link to a story in August, 2008 describing how US presidential candidate Barack Obama referred to his yet-undecided running mate as 'he'—to the dismay of Hillary Clinton supporters who had been holding out strong hope that she would be chosen. Such examples as these are ripe for use in the classroom and can be gathered by the teacher and provided to students for discussion. If

students are more advanced, they could be asked to collect such examples and bring them to class. Fill-in-the-blank exercises could provide an excellent technique for presenting these materials and making the relevant sociolinguistic question of pronoun choice salient.

Conclusion

Pronouns are a pervasive feature of speech: One can hardly speak for very long without uttering several pronouns. In this paper, I have made the case that each time a pronoun is uttered, certain facts about the speaker's communicative intent or frame-of-mind are revealed: A pronoun can show the importance of a particular entity in the current discourse as well as what kind of attitude the speaker has towards that entity or to interlocutors. In short, they can be a window on the speaker's mind, albeit in somewhat subtle ways. For the L2 learner, mastery over pronoun use is minimally necessary in order to prevent miscommunication or pragmatic misunderstanding and maximally necessary to achieve full competence in the target language.

Notes

1 Entities not already introduced in a discourse may still be referred to using pronouns under certain special circumstances, such as when they are implicit in context: "Have you noticed that Mark isn't shaving? — Yes, in fact he's really allowing it to grow now." (Cornish *et al.* 2005)

2 Patterns in the use of pronouns and other anaphoric devices vary crosslinguistically. As such, learners are likely to find that their L1 patterns do not transfer to English (see Roberts, Gullberg, and Indefrey 2008).

3 In some dialects of English in which 'H-dropping' is common, exceptional cases can be found where a reduced pronoun and intonation peak coincide: /...and then 'E celebrated/.

(3,907 words)

References

- Asao, K.** 1999. 'Corpus of English by Japanese Learners.' Presentation at First International Symposium on Computer Learner Corpora, Second Language Acquisition and Foreign Language Teaching, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.
- Clark, H.** and **S. Haviland.** 1977. 'Comprehension and the given-new contract' in R. Freedle (ed.) *Discourse Production and Comprehension*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Cornish, F., A. Garnham, H.W. Cowles, M. Fossard, and V. André.** 2005. 'Indirect anaphora in English and French: A cross-linguistic study of pronoun resolution.' *Journal of Memory and Language* 52/3: 363-376.
- Dauer, R.** 1992. *Accurate English: A Complete Course in Pronunciation*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Gordon, P., B. Grosz, and L. Gilliom.** 1993. 'Pronouns, names, and the centering of attention in discourse.' *Cognitive Science* 17/3: 311–347.
- Halliday, M.** and **R. Hasan.** 1976. *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
- Hobbs, J.** 1979. 'Coherence and coreference.' *Cognitive Science*, 3/1: 67–90.
- Leech, G., P. Rayson, and A. Wilson.** 2001. *Word Frequencies in Written and Spoken English: based on the British National Corpus*. London: Longman.
- Oshima, A.** and **A. Hogue.** 1999. *Writing Academic English* (Third Edition). White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Pennycook, A.** 1994. 'The politics of pronouns.' *ELT Journal* 48/2: 173-178.

Roberts, L., M. Gullberg, and P. Indefrey. 2008. 'Online Pronoun Resolution in L2 Discourse: L1 Influence and General Learner Effects.' *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 30/3: 333-357.

Tono, Y. 2007. *English Corpus of 10,000 Japanese Junior and Senior High School Students*. Tokyo, Japan: Shogakkan.

Walker, M., A. Joshi, and E. Prince (eds). 1997. *Centering Theory in Discourse*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Author

Ralph L. Rose is a faculty member of the Center for English Language Education in Science and Engineering at Waseda University in Tokyo, Japan. His research interests include hesitation phenomena as well as psycholinguistic models of discourse processing and pronoun interpretation. He has taught English as a second/foreign language and linguistics in both the US and Japan for twenty years.