(In)animacy as a factor in the choice of anaphoric pronouns: personal pronouns and demonstratives in German student literary essays

Maria Averintseva-Klisch & Doreen Bryant
University of Tübingen

Theoretical studies and linguistic grammars on reference seldom explicitly distinguish between human referents and inanimate referents. Thus, Ariel (1988: 84) proposes the accessibility scale for Englisch with following material without commenting on possible differences between e.g. *this hat* vs. *this woman*:

(1)   Joan Smith, the president > Joan Smith > The president > Smith > Joan > That/this hat we bought last year > That hat > This hat > That > This > SHE > she > herself > 0

This applies also to studies on demonstrative (DEM) vs. third person personal pronouns (PERS) in languages that allow both to refer to animate and inanimate referents, like in German, cf. Diessel (1999: 96):

(2)   Der Anwalt$_1$ sprach mit einem Klienten$_2$. Da er$_1$/der$_2$ nicht viel Zeit hatte, vereinbarten sie ein weiteres Gespräch nächste Woche.

   'The layer$_1$ talked to a client$_2$. Since PERS$_1$/DEM$_2$ didn't have much time, they agreed to have another meeting next week.'

With this example, Diessel argues that the forefield subject referent that is also the topic and thus most highly accessible tends to be anaphorically resumed with the most economical personal pronoun. A demonstrative, that explicitly sets its referent as the new focus, is reserved for the non-topical referent serving as the middle field object.

Empirical studies on production and reception of DEM vs. PERS also primarily focus on cases with two human referents to find out which one is preferably referred to with which pronoun (e.g. Bosch & Umbach 2007; Bryant & Noschka 2015; Schumacher et al. 2016; Bader & Portele 2019).

In two recent studies where human vs. inanimate referents are explicitly compared, both show results that vary depending on (in)animacy: Bader et al. (2023) show for the production (sentence continuation task) for sentences like (3) with its subject in the forefield and its direct object in the middle field that the pronominal 'division of labour' like in (2) is especially strong with animate referents and weaker with inanimate ones:

(3)   a. Die Besucher der Frankfurter Buchmesse waren sehr überrascht.
       b1. Der Bestseller hat den Autor stark verändert.
       b2. Der Autor hat den Bestseller stark verändert.
       c. Er / Der / Dieser hat / hatte / ist / war …

   'a. The visitors of the Frankfurt book fair were very surprised. b1. The bestseller has changed the author strongly. vs. b2. The author has changed the bestseller strongly. c. PERS/DEM has / had / is / was …'

Bryant, Averintseva-Klisch & Hörnig (2024) show a similarly weaker 'division of labour' between DEM and PERS for inanimate referents in referential chains with only one, clearly topical, referent:

(4) a.   [Eine Polizistin]$_1$ sitzt allein im Dienstwagen. Bei laufendem Motor isst [PRONOMEN]$_1$ einen Döner. Unruhig beobachtet [PRONOMEN]$_1$ das Haus gegenüber.

   'A policewoman$_{FEM}$ is sitting alone in the car$_{NEUTR}$. Whilst the motor is running, [PRONOUN]$_{FEM}$ is eating a Döner. In a restless way [PRONOUN]$_{FEM}$ is observing the house on the opposite.'

   b.   [Eine Jacke]$_1$ hängt draußen auf dem Wäscheständer. Im Wind trocknet [PRONOMEN]$_1$ schnell. Gleich kann [PRONOMEN]$_1$ wieder angezogen werden.

'A coat_FEM is hanging on a washing rack_MASK outside. With the wind, [PRONOUN]_FEM becomes dry very quickly. Soon, [PRONOUN]_FEM can be put on again.'

Whilst Accessibility would expect an 'unmarked referential chain' (Thurmair 2003) of repeated PERS after the referent is established in (4a) and (4b), they find that with inanimate referents (4b), a DEM PERS succession is at least as good.

We assume that the different behaviour of DEM vs. PERS with human vs. inanimate referents is based on their relative eligibility as discourse topics: Human referents are predestined as topics, whilst with inanimate referents their topic status is not that clear and has to be explicitly textually established. That is why either DEM might generally prefer inanimate referents over animate ones or inanimate referents might have more complex pronoun preferences than the animate ones.

To test these assumptions, we conduct a mixed quantitative-qualitative corpus study of 133 student essays on literary subjects, as in these texts the reference might on the one hand concern human figures and authors of primary and secondary texts and on the other hand abstract inanimate objects like 'poetry' or 'time of the story'.

We compare the referent status (human vs. inanimate, abstract or physical entity), the syntactic role and the position of the antecedents of PERS vs. DEM and investigate the specific anaphoric types of the pronouns themselves.

With our results, we hope to get insight into specific regulations on the reference to inanimate objects. This type of reference is particularly common in academic language, so its receptive and productive mastery is also important didactically.

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