

Reference in relation to descriptive content: the case of ACC-ing

Zi Huang

University of Graz

Introduction. English has a verbal gerund construction, namely ACC-ing, where the -ing form assigns structural accusative case to its direct complement and the understood subject receives default accusative case (Marantz 1991). Often assumed to be a nominalization, this structure appears in typical DP positions, such as the subject position (1):

- (1) *John/him turning off the light* was a big mistake.

Recent analyses (Pires 2006; Iordăchioaia 2020) have shown that ACC-ing lacks DP or NP projections. As a result, ACC-ing lacks the syntactic device to be referential, and this puts into question the analyses of ACC-ing as indefinite (Portner 1992) or introducing referents to the discourse (Asher 1993). In this study I describe the discourse functions of ACC-ing from corpus data and attempt to reconcile its behavior with a non-referential analysis.

ACC-ing is not indefinite. Portner (1992) notices that ACC-ing lacks presupposition when used as the complement of non-factive verbs (2), which he attributes to indefiniteness:

- (2) Mary did (not) imagine *John hurting her*. \nrightarrow John had hurt Mary.

In contrast, the presupposition that John had turned off the light is found in (1), where ACC-ing appears as the subject. One may assume that the ACC-ing is a referential indefinite in (1), referring to a specific situation or event of John turning off the light, and a low-scope quantificational reading in (2) (Fodor & Sag 1982). However, the referential reading does not explain why (3) is unacceptable, where the predicate *happen* requires an event as its argument:

- (3) #*John turning off the light* happened during the day.

It is also typical of indefinites to introduce new referents to the discourse and not be anaphoric. However, ACC-ing is compatible with a corresponding situation in the previous discourse, without evoking a new instance of the described state:

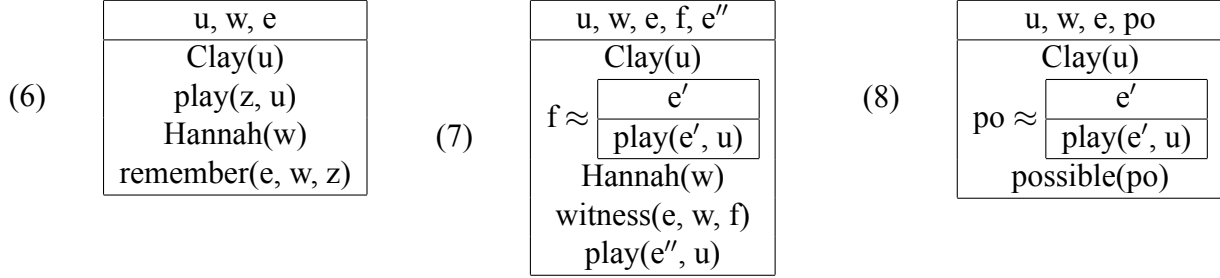
- (4) No wonder that corporate crime is not viewed by many people, including criminologists, as a pressing serious social problem. [...] But the absence of public apprehension over corporate crime does not justify *it being ignored by criminologists* [...]
(BNC)

The lack of presupposition and event reference, in combination with its lack of determiner or nominal properties in syntax points to ACC-ing being non-referential, similar to expressions of kind (Grimm & McNally 2015). An advantage of such an analysis is that ACC-ing does not have to be distinguished from most DP + V-ing constructions, such as absolutes (5) (Stump 1981):

- (5) We just look at each other – *me crying and Marie just staring*.
(BNC)

Representation of ACC-ing in DRT. All similar constructions, in which there is an argumental relation between the accusative subject DP and V-ing and the DP is not the head, can be represented in Discourse Representation Theory as in (6), illustrated by *Hannah remembered Clay playing*. Following Farkas & de Swart's (2003) treatment of incorporated nouns, which introduce thematic arguments instead of referents, I assume that ACC-ing similarly introduces no discourse referents.

The thematic argument z accounts for the argumental relation between *Clay* and *playing*, and serves as an argument of *remember*. This contrasts the referential analysis of *ACC-ing* (Asher 1993), where the gerund contributes a fact or possibility referent to the discourse, whose content is described by a subDRS. (7) stands for *Hannah witnessed Clay playing*, where the event e' is projected to the main DRS as e' , making *Clay playing* is a fact. (8) stands for *Clay playing is possible*, where the event e' remains in the subDRS and the gerund introduces a possibility referent po .



ACC-ing as anaphor and as antecedent. The non-referential analysis raises two questions: one is whether *ACC-ing* can be co-referential with given situations or events, and the other is if it serves as a real antecedent to anaphors. Regarding the first question, in an annotated sample of 200 instances of *ACC-ing*, 22 have their corresponding events occurring in the context. However, since *ACC-ing* does not denote events (as in (3) and also shown by Portner 1992 and Asher 1993), it cannot be co-referential with an event. Assume the following preceding context for (1):

(9) John turned off the light as he left the basement. The basement seemed totally empty.

The given event in (9) provides a background for the use of *ACC-ing* in (1) and helps with building discourse relations. As *ACC-ing* is non-referential, the event in (9) can be seen as merely an instantiation of the kind *John turning off the light*, and (1) indicates that any such instantiation would be a big mistake. In regard to the second question, from the same sample of *ACC-ing*, 10 instances are found to be targeted by anaphors like *it*, *this* and *that*, and 3 have co-referential lexical DPs in the subsequent context. Asher's analysis easily captures the use of *ACC-ing* as an antecedent:

(10) Although *Jeff making me laugh at myself* was the beginning of the end of my depression, *it* wasn't enough to persuade me to stay. (BNC)

This poses a problem for the thematic argument in (6), which cannot be tracked in the discourse. I will discuss a potential solution in a modified DRT similar to that proposed by Mueller-Reichau (2011), where the discourse keeps both object- and kind-level referents. Any object-referring expression also introduces a kind-level referent, of which the object is an instantiation. Extending this analysis to the event domain, (9) contains both a (token) event referent and a kind referent for *John turned off the light*, and the later one is co-referential with the *ACC-ing* in (1). When *ACC-ing* does not appear in a factive context, it still introduces a kind referent which can serve as an antecedent for anaphora. In this sense, descriptive content can still be tracked by discourse referents.

Selected references. Asher, N. (1993). *Reference to abstract objects in discourse*. Dordrecht: Kluwer. // Mueller-Reichau, O. (2011). *Sorting the world: On the relevance of the kind/object-distinction to Referential Semantics*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. // Portner, P. (1992). *Situation Theory and the semantics of propositional expressions* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Amherst, MA.