

On the preference for minimization in referring to persons: Evidence from Hebrew conversation[☆]

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Abstract

Hebrew is among the languages in which person, number and gender are inflected on the verb in past and future tenses. Although free-standing pronouns are therefore “redundant” in common-sense terms when articulated in such contexts, they do occur, and constitute departures from what conversation analysts propose to be a preference for minimization in person reference. Several exemplars are examined to show one interactional environment in which this usage occurs, and which it can be seen to mark, namely, environments of disalignment. Three upshots of this analysis are explicated.

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Conversation-analytic work on person reference now over 25 years old proposed that a single reference term or form can in principle do adequate reference (Sacks, 1972a,b), and that reference to persons is “preferredly done with a single reference form” (Sacks and Schegloff, 1979). The import of this being the preferred reference practice is that, when more than a single form is used, it is accountable; that is, when more is used, parties to the interaction inspect it to find “why that now” (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973:299). A data extract used to exemplify this point

[☆] This research note draws on an M.A. paper, “The Use of the Redundant Pronouns: Marking Actors in Hebrew Conversations,” Department of Sociology, UCLA, 2002, by Gonen Hachohen who collected, transcribed, glossed and translated the data, and participated in the development of the analysis, which here departs in various respects from that of the MA paper. The present text is adapted from a presentation by Emanuel Schegloff at a Conference on Person Reference at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, The Netherlands, April 2005. Although drawing on a limited data base, the observations that follow will, we believe, stand up. Digitized audio files of the data extracts are available at the second author’s web site: <<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/schegloff/>>.

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in the past is displayed as (01) below (taken from Sacks and Schegloff, 1979:19), now re-transcribed and somewhat differently analyzed.

Ann and Bev are talking about an evangelical preacher who might be speaking in a nearby city, and how to arrange to attend:

- (01) SBL 2/2/4 (Sacks and Schegloff, 1979:19)
- 1 Ann: . . . well I was the only one other than
 2 1-> .hhh than thee uhm (0.7) mtch! F₀:rds.
 3 2-> Uh Missiz Holmes Ford? (0.8) You know the-
 4 3-> [the the cellist?
 5 Bev: [Oh yes. She's- she's (a)/(the) cellist.
 6 Ann: Ye: s.
 7 Bev: ye[s
 8 Ann: [Well she and her husband were there, . . .

Here Ann makes three tries at referring to the person she means to convey to her recipient. There are three because – (and here comes its accountability, for us as analysts, and for them as co-conversationalists) – there are three because there is trouble. In the run up to the first reference, the trajectory of Ann's talk displays trouble: the developing course of the talk projects the name to occur at line 1, after “than;” instead there is a break filled by an in-breath; then the “than” is repeated – a second interruption of the talk's progressivity (Schegloff, 1979); then a potential next word appears but is immediately followed by another stall – an “uhm” followed by silence, and eventually by the name – “Fords.”

Referring by name is the prototype for “recognitional” reference, that is, referring in a way that conveys that the speaker supposes that the recipient knows (or knows of) the referent, and that the recipient can figure out who-that-they-know is being referred to from the form used to do the reference (Sacks and Schegloff, 1979; Schegloff, 1996). When it is possible, recognitional reference is preferred (*ibid.*). So it is a recognitional reference that Ann is in the process of producing, but its production here is problematic (as is partially detailed in the preceding paragraph), and in such environments it is common for recipients to mark the success of its production by some recognition token. When no such display is forthcoming (after “Fords”), Ann adds a second try, different from the first and produces it this time *as* a “try,” with its upward intonation contour and space left for a sign of recognition, “uh Missiz Holmes Ford?” (line 3); and again, this time in quite a long silence, there is no recognition; and before Bev can claim and then demonstrate recognition, Ann has already launched a third formulation, again marked as a try. So we get to see here three distinct instances of “a single reference form,” and we get to see and hear *three* of them because of the problematicalness of the recognitional reference forms being tried.

Note then that each reference is packaged as “a form,” and that “a single form” need not be a single word; it can be a phrase, it can be a clause, and, as we will see in a moment, it can be less than a word—an affix. Its minimality is not defined by words; it is better understood by its packaging – sometimes a recognizably complete grammatical construction, sometimes its delivery in some recognizably complete-for-now prosodic contour – whether up or down, sometimes a gestural component such as a point, and others. We will return later to the question of the “information load” that a reference form delivers.

With this account of minimization in hand, and with the understanding that a preference for minimization involves in part that departure from minimization is accountable for what else is being done besides referring, we turn to interaction in a language quite different from English, with

resources for referring to persons that are different in various respects from English—namely Hebrew.

In Hebrew, the verb is inflected in the past and future tenses for person (speaker, recipient, or other), for number (one or more) and for gender. There are, of course, pronouns for self- and recipient-reference as well: the only ones that will figure in the discussion to follow are: “ani” for self/singular (not marked for gender); “atah” for singular male recipient, and “at” for singular female recipient. As well, only past tense usages figure in the data extracts examined here.¹

The deployment of these free-standing pro-terms with past and future tensed verbs is, conventionally speaking, redundant, for all the information is already obligatorily included in the verb form. Still, examination of recorded episodes of ordinary talk-in-interaction reveals that such usages are not uncommon. We will be looking at usages in the past tense in which the free-standing *pronoun* references for speaker and recipient *are* articulated even though person is inflected on the verb.²

Even if conventionally speaking “redundant,” *conversation-analytically* speaking, these usages are in principle *not* redundant. Speakers “know” that person is inflected on the verb, and most often do *not* deploy a pronoun reference together with verbs in past or future tense for which the subject is speaker or recipient. Accordingly, a speaker’s deployment of a free-standing pro-term is inspectable (both by co-participants and by investigators) for what else is being done thereby. Here, as elsewhere, observing the preference for minimization is a central feature of referring *simpliciter*—that is, doing “just referring” and nothing else. Adding a pro-term reference when person is conveyed in the verb-form constitutes a departure from this preference, and implements and conveys the accomplishment of something else in addition to simply referring.

When more than a single reference form is used to achieve the recognition of a referent by the recipient in English (as in the “Missiz Holmes Ford? the cellist?” in Extract 1), this is most often done by *adding to the information* embodied in the initial, single, reference. In the exchanges being examined here, however, the addition of the pronoun appears to add *no* referential information to what is already provided in the verb. What else is the addition of this pronoun doing then, over and above simply referring? One answer, briefly put, is that “grammatically redundant” first and second person singular pronouns in the past tense appear in environments of dispreferred actions,³ or *pre-figure* such environments. Here are three such environments.

The first environment is one of disagreement with the prior talk of the recipient, as in Extract (02). Friends Gali and Dorit are driving in the car toward Tel Aviv in Israel, and Dorit starts reflecting on her heavy day.

(02) 4.1.4 mfcarr

1 Dorit: 'avar 'alay yom kashe:: 'Ani
passed on+me day har::d. I
I had a hard day I

¹ We are indebted to Dr. Yael Maschler of the University of Haifa for bringing to our attention the M.A. thesis of Polak (2004) which examines a more extensive data set, takes up data across tenses and persons, and proposes usages other than the one taken up here. Nothing in that work appears incompatible with the upshot of the present discussion.

² Although the details of the linguistic structure differ, Duranti (1984) takes up for Italian an issue very much like the one treated here, but the materials that he addresses appear to be drawn primarily from narrative, while narrative does not figure in materials examined here; and the “social” or “discursive” effects which he proposes differ from those reported here.

³ On the import of the terms “preference” and “dispreference” in conversation-analytic work, see (Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987 [1973]; Schegloff, 1988, in press).

- 2 'aye::fa = 'ex 'e:ex hayiti 'omeret et ze
tir::ed =how h:how I+was say it
am tired. How do I say it
- 3 tam↑id? Fe::
alwa↑ys? Fe:: ((wipes her nose))
usually?
- 4 (1.2)
- 5 Gali: 'anlo yoda'at. 'od lo shafaxt (.) kafe 'az
I'no know. yet no spilled+you' (.) coffee so
I don't know. You haven't spilled coffee yet so
- 6 'ani lo yoda'at.=
I no know.=
I don't know. ((spilling coffee is one of Dorit's features))
- 7 Dorit:1- > =**'ani** lo shatiti kafe hayom, **'anshatiti** [te::y.]
=**I** no I+drank coffee today, **I** drank+I [te::a.]
I didn't drink coffee today, I drank tea.
- 8 Gali: [SHAKRA]nit.
[L I A]R.
Liar. ((shouts))
- 9 1- > **'at** shatit kafe sha[xor 'ecli 'al hashul]xan.=
you drank+you coffee bla[ck by+me on the+tab]le.=
you drank black coffee in my place on the table.
- 10 Dorit: [ze kafe shaxo:r]
[it black cof:ee]
It was black coffee.

At lines 2–3 Dorit appears to have gone into a word search for the expression she ordinarily uses for such occasions, and after over a second of the search, in which Gali is unable to help though invited to do so (line 4), she (Gali) gives up, invoking the absence of an event which apparently generally occurs in such occasions—Dorit spills coffee all over herself. Gali ends her turn by repeating that she does not know for which expression Dorit is searching. To this point in the sequence, each party has used a single reference form to refer to self or recipient.⁴

Dorit's response is to reject that account by denying that she had any coffee to spill, and this denial – a prototypically dispreferred response (even if joking) – is delivered in a turn (at line 7) both of whose verbs are inflected for first person singular on the verb (in the italicized final *ti*), but which start nonetheless with the first person singular pronoun “*ani*” (in boldface). This rejection is then contested in turn by Gali (at line 9), who, after shouting “*Liar*” (at line 8), remarks that Dorit *had* had coffee at her house. Here again, in another dispreferred action, the

⁴ Either they use present tense, in which the person is not inflected on the verb and is expressed by a pronoun (“*ani* ‘aye::fa’” by Dorit in 1–2, “*An’lo yoda’at*” by Gali in 5), or they use the past tense without a pronoun (“*hayiti*” by Dorit in 2, “*shafaxt*” by Gali in 5).

singular feminine past tense verb is marked for recipient or (second person) by the italicized “*it*” at the end of the second word, but is preceded by the feminine recipient proterm (in boldface), “*at*.”

A second environment is one in which the speaker is *reporting* prior talk involving disagreement or rejection, as shown in Extract (03)—line 14.

(03) 4.2.1 mp1

- 1 Yosi: halo::, ma shlomex Galya?
hallo::, what peace+yours Galya?
Hello, how are you Galya?
- 2 Gali: beseder. ma shlomxa?
in+order. what peace+yours?
Okay. How are you?
- 3 Yosi: beseder.
in+order.
Okay.
- 4 Gali:3- > .hh e:::m **ani** *dibarti* im Sara,
.hh e:::m **I** talked + *I'* with Sara,
.hh e:::m I talked with Sara,
- 5 Yosi: muhm=
muhm=
M hm=
- 6 Gali: yesh lanu kcat haxlatot.=
have to+us a bit decisions.=
We have a few decisions. ((We've made a few decisions.))
- 7 Yosi: ken.
yes
Yes.
- 8 Gali: 'anaxnu xosheshot she'ulay lo kol kax tohav 'otan 'aval
we fear that+maybe no so much you'll+like them but
We are afraid that maybe you will not like them but
- 9 ze nir'a haya le:: .hhh keilu .hh sxitat 'emcaim
it seemed was to:: .hhh as+is .hh squeezing means
it seemed, like using all the means
- 10 'efsharit 'az ze be'erex higia lamaskanot habaot.
possible so it kind+of reached+it to+the+conclusions the+next
available, so it kind of reached the following conclusions.
- 11 Yosi: 'ue::ma.
ue::what.
Eh::What.
- 12 Gali: .tch e::hm (.) Sara cxa kcat xofe:sh,
.tch e::hm (.) Sara n'eds bit bre:ak,
.tch e::hm (.) Sara needs a short break

- 13 Yosi: mehm,
Um hm,
Um hm,
- 14 Gali:2- > ve' **ani** lo heskamti:: 'e:: (0.6) latet la legamre,
And+I no I+agree::d e:: (0.6) to+give her totally,
And I didn't agree to give ((it)) to her indefinitely,
- 15 (0.6) ke'ilu hi dibra:: 'al shlosa xodashim hi
(0.6) as+if she talked on three months she
(0.6) Like she talked about three months she
- 16 4- > 'ulay ta 'ase hafsaka:: veze \emptyset 'amarti- lo:: [h h h h]
maybe she'll+do brea::k and+it I+said- no:: [h h h h]
would maybe take a break and so on I said no.
- 17 Yosi: [(tch.)]
[(tch.)]

Here, Gali (the same “Gali” as in Extract (02)) has called Yosi, a man who is the teacher of the voluntary study group in which Gali and her friend Sara participate, in exchange for which Gali is helping to take care of his mother. She is calling to announce a temporary hiatus in their studies, which therefore potentially has monetary consequences for this exchange arrangement. She reports that Sara said that she needed a break, and that she (Gali) had not agreed to the length of break that Sara had proposed. In reporting the action she had taken in response to Sara, Gali says (line 14), “ve'ani lo heskamti::” – “and I did not agree. . .” in which by now the reader may already recognize the “*ti*” which marks first person singular on the verb, and the “*ani*” preceding it which is the first person singular pronoun. So here we have not the disagreement itself, but the *report* of one.

The third environment for the more-than-minimal person reference is an even more remote introduction of a report of a conversation whose upshot is thereby marked as being not to the taste of, or negatively valenced for, the current recipient. Look again, at Extract (03), but now at arrow 3 at line 4. Here Gali is first introducing the reason for her call, by reporting that she had talked with Sara. What is striking is that her deployment of the first person singular past tense together with “*ani*” can already alert Yosi that what she has to report may not be to his liking—a stance which a few moments later she articulates in so many words at line 8.⁵

Finally, in most cases when the more than minimized reference appears, it appears in the first place available (that is, on the first verb that can take it) and then it may be dropped, as can be seen in Extract (03) at arrow 4 at line 16. Here Gali is reporting that she said “no” to Sara’s proposal, but the verb inflection is not preceded by an articulated first person pronoun.⁶

⁵ This first person reference may be “over-determined” in that it also occurs at the opening of a new spate of talk (cf. footnote 7).

⁶ There are sequences in which there is a continuation in the usage of the more-than-minimized form of reference, and we can tentatively suggest that this serves to extend the dispreferred tenor of the interaction or report of interaction, but we cannot take up such data here.

These materials afford an opportunity to observe a departure from minimization not observable on English language materials, which do not inflect person on the verb. What can we learn from specimens like these? The central observation points to the deployment of this usage in marking, embodying or managing the negative valence or dispreferred character of the local proceedings. In this respect, it is worth recalling a finding in Barbara Fox' dissertation research (Fox, 1987) that, when the re-reference to a person just referred to by name or other locally initial reference form is not the default locally subsequent form of pro-term, but another locally initial form and, indeed, the *same* locally initial form as has just been used, virtually all the observed instances were in disagreement or other disaligning contexts, as in Extract (04)—where “Kerin” is referred to in the very next turn not by “she” but again by “Kerin,” and Extract (05), where the same practice is evident in the references to “Oxfrey.”

(04) SN-4, 2

- 1 Sher: You didn't come t' talk t' Kerin?
 2 (0.4)
 3 Mark: No, Kerin: (·) Kerin 'n I 'r having a fight.

(05) Auto Discussion, 6 (simplified)

- 1 Curt: I heard Oxfrey gotta new ca:r.
 2 (0.7)
 3 Mike: Oxfrey's runnin the same car 'e run last year,=

So for self and recipient reference in Hebrew we find “more than” the default form in disagreement environments, and for reference to third parties in American English we find “more than” the default form of pro-terms in disagreement environments. And in both instances, the “more than” addition to the minimal form is referentially vacuous – it adds no new referential information.⁷

The upshot of these observations is three-fold: (1) the preference for minimization in person reference holds in a language quite different in character from English, one in which person reference can be accomplished sub-lexically; (2) in both contexts, departures from the preferred practice are accountable, and this is evidenced by their distribution, which is concentrated in environments of trouble—whether trouble in production (as in Extract (01)) or in interactional alignment (as in Extracts (02), (03), (04) and (05)); (3) the preference for minimization is a formal preference; that is, it is a preference for the use of a single form and not necessarily for a minimization of referential information, for, in both Hebrew and English data, an additional form may carry no new referential information, other than the sheer fact of its addition.

⁷ Another finding of Polak's thesis is that “. . . 53% of [unattached pronouns] signal a break in continuity” (Maschler, personal communication). Although we have not examined the data on which Polak's work is based, it seems likely that this finding also resonates with conversation-analytic findings for English, specifically with the observation (Schegloff, 1996:451–453) that use of a full noun phrase reference instead of a pronoun in what could be a locally subsequent reference position can mark a new departure in the talk, talk which might otherwise be understood by recipients as continuing the just-prior talk about the referent. In the context under examination here, the upgrade to a fuller form appears in the use of a free-standing pronoun in addition to the inflection on the verb.

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