From reference . . .

UNIT 4 REFERRING EXPRESSIONS

Entry requirements  REFERENCE and SENSE (Unit 3). If you feel you understand these notions, take the entry test below. If not, review Unit 3 before continuing.

Entry test  Answer the following questions:

(1) Give an example of an expression that might be used to refer to the President of the United States in 2007.

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(2) Give an example of an expression that could have variable reference.

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(3) Give an example of an expression that always (in normal everyday conversation) has constant reference.

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(4) Give an example of different expressions having one referent.

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(5) Give an example of an expression that has no reference.

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(6) Which of the following is a correct description of ‘reference’? Circle your choice.
   (a) a relationship between expressions and other expressions which have the same meaning
   (b) the set of all objects which can potentially be referred to by an expression
   (c) a relationship between a particular object in the world and an expression used in an utterance to pick that object out

Feedback  (1) George W. Bush, the former Governor of Texas, etc. (2) my car, this page, etc. (3) England, the sun, etc. (4) the Morning Star and the Evening Star, etc. (5) and, if, etc. (6)(c)

If you got at least 5 out of 6 correct, continue to the introduction. Otherwise, review Unit 3 before proceeding.
In this unit we develop the notion of reference (introduced in Unit 3), and consider more closely the range of expressions that speakers may use to refer to some object or person in the world. We will see that some expressions can only be used as referring expressions, some never can, and some expressions can be used to refer or not, depending on the kind of sentence they occur in. We introduce a notion (equative sentence) that is closely bound up with the idea of referring expressions.

A REFERRING EXPRESSION is any expression used in an utterance to refer to something or someone (or a clearly delimited collection of things or people), i.e. used with a particular referent in mind.

The name Fred in an utterance such as ‘Fred hit me’, where the speaker has a particular person in mind when he says ‘Fred’, is a referring expression. Fred in ‘There’s no Fred at this address’ is not a referring expression, because in this case a speaker would not have a particular person in mind in uttering the word.

Could the following possibly be used as referring expressions? Circle the answer of your choice.

1. John
2. My uncle
3. and
4. the girl sitting on the wall by the bus stop
5. a man
6. my parents
7. send
8. under

(1) Yes (2) Yes (3) No (4) Yes (5) Yes, as in ‘A man was in here looking for you’. (6) Yes (My parents refers to a pair of things. For convenience at this point we use the idea of reference to include clearly delimited collections of things.) (7) No (8) No

The same expression can be a referring expression or not (or, as some would put it, may or may not have a ‘referring interpretation’), depending on the context. This is true of indefinite noun phrases.

When a speaker says, ‘A man was in here looking for you last night’ is a man being used to refer to a particular man?

Yes / No

So, in the above example, is a man a referring expression?

Yes / No
(3) When a speaker says, ‘The first sign of the monsoon is a cloud on the horizon no bigger than a man's hand’, is a man being used to refer to a particular man? Yes / No
(4) Is a man in this example a referring expression? Yes / No
(5) Is forty buses, used in ‘Forty buses have been withdrawn from service by the Liverpool Corporation’, a referring expression? Yes / No
(6) Is forty buses, used in ‘This engine has the power of forty buses’, a referring expression? Yes / No

Feedback
(1) Yes (2) Yes (3) No (4) No (5) Yes, assuming that the speaker has 40 specific buses in mind (6) No

Comment
In the above examples the linguistic context often gave a vital clue as to whether the indefinite noun phrase was a referring expression or not. But it does not always give a clear indication.

Practice
Are the following referring expressions? (Imagine normal circumstances for the utterance.)
(1) a Norwegian, used in ‘Nancy married a Norwegian’ Yes / No
(2) a Norwegian, used in ‘Nancy wants to marry a Norwegian’ Yes / No
(3) a car, used in ‘John is looking for a car’ Yes / No
(4) a man with a limp, used in ‘Dick believes that a man with a limp killed Bo Peep’ Yes / No
(5) a man with a limp, used in ‘A man with a limp killed Bo Peep’ Yes / No
(6) a swan, used in ‘Every evening at sunset a swan flew over the house’ Yes / No

Feedback
(1) Yes (2) Yes and No: the sentence is ambiguous. It depends on whether the speaker has in mind a particular person whom Nancy wants to marry. (3) Yes and No: the sentence is ambiguous. It depends on whether the speaker has a particular car in mind. (4) Yes and No (5) Yes, it can be. (6) Yes and No

Comment
All of the ambiguities in the above examples could in fact be resolved by the use of the word certain immediately following the indefinite article a, as in, for example: ‘Nancy wants to marry a certain Norwegian’ or ‘John is looking for a certain car’.

All of the above examples involve indefinite noun phrases. It is clear that, given our definitions, which allude to what is in the mind of the speaker on a particular occasion of utterance, indefinite noun phrases can be referring expressions. Other definitions could yield different results. What the above
examples show is that, in our terms, whether an expression is a referring expression is heavily dependent on linguistic context and on circumstances of utterance.

We turn now to the case of definite noun phrases.

Practice Are the following referring expressions? (Imagine normal circumstances for the utterances.)

(1) *John* in ‘John is my best friend’
(2) *he* in ‘He’s a very polite man’, said by a husband to his wife in a conversation about their bank manager
(3) *it* in ‘It’s sinking!’ used in a conversation about a battleship which has just been attacked
(4) *the man who shot Abraham Lincoln* in ‘The man who shot Abraham Lincoln was an unemployed actor’

Feedback (1) Yes (2) Yes (3) Yes (4) Yes

Comment These straightforward examples show how definite noun phrases of various kinds, proper names (e.g. *John*), personal pronouns (e.g. *he, it*), and longer descriptive expressions (as in question (4)) can all be used as referring expressions. Indeed, definite noun phrases such as these most frequently are used as referring expressions. But, even with definite noun phrases, there are examples in which they are not (or not clearly) referring expressions.

Practice Are the following expressions referring expressions?

(1) *he* in ‘If anyone ever marries Nancy, he’s in for a bad time’
   (meaning that whoever marries Nancy is in for a bad time)
(2) *it* in ‘Every man who owns a donkey beats it’
(3) *the person who did this* in ‘The person who did this must be insane’, spoken by someone on discovering a brutally mutilated corpse, where the speaker has no idea who committed the crime
(4) *Smith’s murderer* in ‘Smith’s murderer must be insane’, uttered in circumstances like the above, where the corpse is Smith’s

Feedback (1) No, the speaker has no particular individual in mind as Nancy’s possible future husband. (2) No, *it* doesn’t refer to any particular donkey here. (3) Not such a clear case, but it could be argued that *the person who did this* is not a referring expression in this example. (4) Similarly, an unclear case, but again it could be argued that *Smith’s murderer* is not a referring expression here.
Comment  Such examples show that the notion ‘referring expression’ is not always easy to apply. Part of the difficulty encountered in the last two examples stems from the fact that it is not clear what we mean when we say that a speaker must have a particular individual in mind in order to refer. We shall not try to resolve this issue here. But note that in the case of definite noun phrases also, the question of whether they are used as referring expressions is very much dependent on the context and circumstances of use.

We now move to a different topic, starting with consideration of definite noun phrases, but linking eventually with some of the previous examples involving indefinite noun phrases.

Practice (1) Would the phrase the President of the United States used in a conversation about American politics in 2007 have the same referent as the expression the Leader of the Republican Party in the same conversation?  
Yes / No

(2) Take the schematic utterance ‘X hasn’t a hope of winning the next election’. If we replace X by either ‘the President’ or ‘the Leader of the Republican Party’, will the two resultant utterances be equivalent in meaning, i.e. both describe exactly the same state of affairs? (Assume still the context of a conversation about American politics in 2007.)  
Yes / No

(3) Assume a situation in which John is standing alone in the corner. Would John and the person in the corner refer to the same individual in a conversation about this situation?  
Yes / No

(4) In the conversation about the situation in which John is alone in the corner, would the following two utterances make exactly the same claim?

‘John looks as if he’s about to faint’
‘The person in the corner looks as if he’s about to faint’  
Yes / No

Feedback  (1) Yes (2) Yes (3) Yes (4) Yes

Comment  Normally, one expects that utterances which differ only in that they use different expressions referring to the same thing (or person) will have the same meaning, as in the above examples. Indeed, this normally is the case. But there is a class of exceptions to this generalization. This is the class of examples involving opaque contexts.