# REFERENCE ERROR OCCURRENCES

# AND HOW THEY AFFECT COMMUNICATION

**LAKO Cristian**

*Abstract*

This paper deals with miscommunication issues generated by occurrences of erroneous reference usage among the parties involved in a communication process. Reference errors occur in communication either accidentally, when such errors are due to involuntary mismatch of reference, or intentionally, when either of the sides attempt to mislead and/or manipulate. We will point out some of the psycho-linguistic processes that may cause these communication faults in the case of involuntary reference errors.

**Keywords: references, communication, error, manipulation, psycholinguistics**

The primary function of communication is to bind together people and communities. Communication means exchanging ideas, sending and receiving information about current, past or future events, situations or entities.

The bridges that link a discussion into effective and efficient communication are the common references tacitly agreed upon by the sides of the communication. Referencing is linked to inferring. The function of inference is the mental process by which the receptor attempts to decipher the message conveyed by the sender. Although prescriptive, Grice's cooperative principle, and his conversational maxims are a good starting point in elucidating how some pragmatic fallacies occur in communication.

The expression "pragmatic fallacies", however should be used only when errors in communication appear involuntarily and not when one of the participants willingly is trying to mislead his/her counterpart(s), as misleading can be part of a communication process.

Next, the paper will deal with involuntary erroneous reference by providing examples and discussing on the factors that lead to these rupture in communication.

## 1. Involuntary erroneous reference in adult to adult communication

Most errors in referring occur when one of the parties changes by mistake the signifier. Usually, in controlled environments, a conversation develops normally, without interruptions, and changes in the signifier occur only due to psychological factors. However,



BDD-A3036 © 2009 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:26 UTC)

if we consider a natural environment where disruptions can occur frequently, picking up a conversation from where it was left can cause short-circuiting of the communication process and changes of reference may be considered by the counterpart speaker at least peculiar.

Consider the following hypothetical situation:

(1) Teacher to secretary: *Please hand me over the register, as I need to enter the marks of the students.*
Secretary: *Just a minute, I have to look for it.*
Phone ringing
Teacher: *I'll be in your office soon.*
Voice over the phone: *OK, looking forward to discuss your project.*
Secretary adding date of examination while teacher losing patience.
Teacher: *Are you going to hand it (*referring to *the sheet of paper*- not uttered*) over already?*
Secretary: *It (feminine)? Wasn't you supposed to say it (neuter)?*
[...]

Although in English there is no problem at all in sending the message across, as both *the register*, and *the sheet* of paper on which the list with the students are put are both referred to with *it*, this would not be the same in languages such as Romanian, where *the register* (catalogul) is neuter while *the* s*heet (*foaia) is feminine. The process behind this change of reference occurrence is quite interesting and causes confusion. The teacher changes the semantic range from that of a particular sheet of paper used as a register to its hypernym, any sheet of paper used for paperwork. *It* is not used as an anaphora, hence the secretary's reaction. The secretary signals back that reference does not exist or it does not comply with the proper grammatical gender. Given the situation, *it* becomes a cataphora to subsequent explanations of the teacher in which he would mention that he was actually referring to a different signifier, the word *sheet of paper*, yet to the same signified, but with a larger reference range. Context stays the same, which helps in correcting the miscommunication process.

In French, the very same situation could be replicated as *the register* in French is *le cahier* (masculine), while *the sheet* is feminine: *la feuille*. However, the situation in (1), in German, although German is grammatically gendered, would not short-circuit this particular conversation as both das Klassenbuch and das Blatt are neuter.

Nevertheless, such situations can be found in any language that employs grammatical gender. In German we could think of *der Film* as the hyponym of *die Kunst*. On the other hand languages such as Armenian, Chinese, Finish, Hungarian, Vietnamise and many others around the globe do not have grammatical gender; therefore this type of communication error can not appear.



BDD-A3036 © 2009 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:26 UTC)

Apart from **hyponymy,** another mental process can change the reference. The usage of a noun determiner as head of the NP (noun phrase) is a quite common language practice, which in the case of grammatically gendered languages can further create confusion.

Consider the following conversation over the phone:

(2) Order handler person (OHP): *King Pizza Restaurant. Good morning!*

Customer (C): *Good morning! I would like to order 3 pizzas.*

OHP: *What exactly would you like to have?*

C: *I would like a Prosciutto Pizza, a Meat Feast Pizza, and a King Pizza, all extra large and no topping please.*

OHP: *So your order is a Prosciutto Pizza, a Meat Feast Pizza, and a King.*

C: *Right.*

[...]

*A Prosciutto Pizza, a Meat Feast Pizza,* and *a King Pizza* are all NPs that can be reduced to simpler NPs, that is, reducing them to *a Prosciutto*, *a Meat Feast*, and respectively *a King*. Using the indefinite article *a* as determiner is considered by many scholars as **generic reference**, that is, it is used attributively and represents a class of things that of the prosciutto pizzas, for example. However, given the context in (2) *a Prosciutto Pizza* is somewhat particularized, as the message may be inferred as the next prosciutto pizza that is going to be baked and delivered, so it can be thought of as **specific reference**. Although compared to an example such as *The cat is a mammal* which analysed only semantically is sufficient to be viewed as generic reference, *a prosciutto pizza* needs a pragmatic context and inference from the part of the receiver in order to be perceived as a specific reference.

Although in English the communication process in (2) does not pose any problem and each of the NPs referring to the three types of pizza either uttered in full or in their reduced form will not affect the communication from the point of view of grammatical gender. Yet, in Romanian, which makes heavy use of grammatical gender, having the same dialogue, the OHP changes the grammatical gender reference of the signified by reducing *a King pizza(o pizza king)* to *a King(un king),* thus although the signified is the same as in the info provided by the customer, it can trigger discordance in the mind of the customer. In Romanian *pizza* is feminine while the word *king,* used as a borrowed word in Romanian (consider the name of the restaurant as well) would usually trigger a neuter grammatical gender, even if most Romanian speakers are aware that the natural gender for *king* is



BDD-A3036 © 2009 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:26 UTC)

masculine. But if the client was to change his order and ask for *three King pizzas*, the reduction to *3 kings* although with no transformation issues in English, in Romanian *trei king**uri*** (the -*uri* ending is the neuter plural) would sound very odd opposing the natural gender, and the trei *king**i*** (the –*i* ending is the masculine plural) would also sound weird, so the customer needs to reconvert the NP back to its full form *trei pizza king* (three king pizzas; in Romanian the singular and plural form for the word *pizza* coincide). So using the wrong anaphora pronoun in Romanian, in the case of ordering only *King Pizza*, as in

*Livraţi-mi-**o** pe adresa...*(correct referencing if singular and feminine – ***o** pizza king*)

*Livraţi-mi-**l** pe adresa...*(right referencing if singular and masculine – ***un** king*)

*Livraţi-mi-**i** pe adresa...**(wrong reference as *trei king**i*** would be inappropriate)

*Livraţi-mi-**le** pe adresa...*(appropriate as -*le* refers adequately to *trei pizza king*)

*(Deliver **it**/ **them** to the following address...)*

However, this is not only the case of borrowed words. In Romanian and in English we can refer to the same colour as (3)*culoarea roşie*(colour red) and (4)*roşul*(the red), yet, in Romanian, the grammatical gender of (3) is feminine while (4) is masculine. Unlike in the example (1) where semantic range changes, or in (2) where a noun used attributively in the initial NP becomes the head of the NP, in (3) and (4) the adjective is substantivized, that is, turned into a noun and becomes the head of the NP. However, such transformation would not change the grammatical gender where the natural gender is obvious:

(5) *femeia bătrână* > *bătrâna* (the old woman) with the referents *ea* or *–o*

(6)*omul bătrân* > *bătânul* (the old man) with the referents *el* or *îl*, *–l*

In English the substantivization of *old* would change both the signifier and the signified as (7)*the old* would refer to plural. So although it can be reduced to a simpler NP the meaning changes, unlike in grammatically gendered languages. However, this rule cannot be applied to nouns that refer to non-human beings or to objects, in any language grammatically gendered or not. What the languages can do is to replace the head noun with a pronoun.

(8)*cartea roşie* > *cea roşie* with *ea* or *o* as their anaphora

(9)*the red book* > *the red one* with *it* as their anaphora

In German there is a classic example where the natural gender does not correspond to the grammatical gender: *das Mädchen*. One could think of a similar situation as in (1), but a



BDD-A3036 © 2009 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:26 UTC)

context where one would not consider *die Studentin* the hyponym of *das Mädchen* but rather on how the intetrolcutoras are related to the same signified, hence using different signifiers and with different grammatical gender. Consider (10), (11) and (12) below as part of a conversation at an opening student festival. The student's grandfather would probably refer to her niece with *das Mädchen*:

(10) *Das Mädchen wird schöner mit jedem Tag.*

(11) A professor referring to the same person could add: *Ja, und diese Studentin ist auch sehr intelligent.*

(12) A third person: *Sie ist auch schön und intelligent.*

In (12) normally the grammatical gender should correspond to the last sentence uttered, so the usage of *sie* would seems to most speakers as natural, however, if the third person is closer in terms of perceiving the world to the first speaker, let's assume she is the student's grandmother, she would rather say:

(13) *Es ist auch schön und intelligent.*

*Es* in (13) shows that the third speaker refers back to the subject in (11) although (13) sums up (11) and (12).

Sometimes reference can be unclear at a higher level of a communication. In this case grammatical gender no longer interferes with the transmission of the message. Consider the following setting:

(14) Reporter(R) interviews a clairvoyant(C):

R: *Could you tell us a few situations when you actually used your abilities?*

C: *I once helped a woman communicate with her dead husband. Her husband told her through me that he was fine and very happy to talk to her* [...]

R: *Anything else?*

C: *Her husband said nothing else.*

R: *I was asking about any other situations.*

[...]

*Anything else* in (14) is a referent which lacks clarity, consequently the interlocutor could refer back either to the closest pointer in the conversation or to the next hierarchically



BDD-A3036 © 2009 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:26 UTC)

higher point, that is to *situations*. This type of reference error can be avoided by providing a clearer reference to the interlocutor.

Although adults have a much larger vocabulary, thus being able to fine tune the message being transmitted, background knowledge and how one perceive the world can play an important role in the inferring process and in the shift of the reference.

The next part will deal with examples of how children of 18 months old make use of a very limited number of words or signifiers to communicate with adults.

### 1.2 Child to adult communication

A very young child will communicate in a different way than an adult, due to the limitation of the sounds he/she can utter. Consider the following situation:

(15)Baby: [hɕm]![...][hA:.əA:m]!

[hɕm] when used by an adult trying to feed a child, could mean in Hungarian *eat* or *try this bit of food*. This idiophone represents something yummy. The baby in the first instance use it accordingly, and then by using its variation [hA:.'A:m] shows that the child apart from getting the food she also insists on getting it already. When used this way [hɕm]![...][hA:.'A:m]!refers to *I am hungry* or *I want to taste that.*

(16)Baby: [hɕm] [hɕm]!

[hɕm] when repeated is an alternative Hungarian onomatopoeia that represents the barking of a dog. The child uses it as such to play, so the reference in this case is *let's play*. The difference between the two signified in (15) and (16) will be determined based on context.

By (17) ['brumbrum] the baby refers to anything used by people to move faster, be that a car, a bike, a sledge or even a pair of skates. It seems that the child has found similarities among these objects and their hypernym is ['brumbrum]

What is also interesting is the use, for instance, of the terms (18)['tA:τA:](daddy) and (19)['bΘβΘ](baby), for any male adult, and respectively for any toddler. ['bΘβΘ] is also used by the baby to refer to herself, although everybody is calling her by her proper name. Nevertheless, the baby identifies herself with the class of toddlers, and is using ['bΘβΘ] as a prototype.

Although the same signifier is used for several signified, the reference assignment is clear for the adults, as the context is primordial in determining the sociolinguistic frame of



BDD-A3036 © 2009 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:26 UTC)

reference. The above examples show that the baby posses innate abilities such as prototyping, assigning referents, disambiguating through body language, modulating word meanings, and utilising context.

In this paper we showed that sometimes during a communication process there may be cases of erroneous referencing. Grammatically gendered languages are more prone to such errors when processes such as hyponymy, changes in the construction of the NPs, or substantivization interfere in the communication process. Ambiguity can also cause referencing errors, regardless of the type of language, grammatically gendered or not. Child to adult communication is an interesting subject of study as it shows how both the child and the adult make use of context in establishing the signifier and the signified. Further study on the usage of reference could be made on cases where one of the interlocutors changes reference during a communication process, in order to confuse, mislead, manipulate or dominate a conversation.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY


1. Black E, (2006) *Pragmatic Stylistics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press
2. Cutting J, (2002) *Pragmatics and Discourse*, Florence: Routledge
3. Devitt M., Hanley R., (2006) *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Language,* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing
4. Field J.,(2004) *Psycholinguistics: The Key Concepts*, London: Routledge
5. Hurford J., Heasley B., Smith M., (2007) *Semantics: A Course Book,* Cambridge: CUP
6. Malmkjær K.,(1991) *The Linguistics Encyclopedia*, New York: Routledge
7. McCarthy M., (2006) *Explorations in Corpus Linguistics*, New York: OUP
8. Miller A.,(1998) *Philosophy of Language*, Abingdon: Routledge
9. Pinker S,(1994) *The Language Instinct*, London: Penguin
10. Yule G., (1996) *Pragmatics*, New York: OUP




BDD-A3036 © 2009 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:26 UTC)