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## Chapter 5

### **Young Children's Experience of Referentiality and Nonreferentiality in Dialogue**

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**Abstract:** This chapter focuses on young children's experience of referential and nonreferential uses of noun phrases (NPs) in everyday

dialogues. Our study of a corpus of interactions between adults and children aged 1;10 to 2;6 showed that the indeterminacy and instability that might characterise children's uses can also be found in adults' discourse. Not only are (non)referential values co-constructed, but children are also not exposed to clear-cut contrasts between the uses or values of NPs. On the contrary, both in the adults' discourse and in the way adults react to children's utterances, they seem to experience the fact that noun phrases potentially present various facets, which can be successively or simultaneously activated in dialogue.

**Keywords:** dialogue, indeterminacy, labelling, language acquisition, noun phrases, referentiality

**Running head:** Children's Experience of Referentiality and Nonreferentiality

This study aims to explore the way young children experience referential and nonreferential uses of noun phrases (NPs) in everyday dialogues. As Laury, Ewing and Thompson showed in their introductory chapter to this volume, the field of reference studies is far from being homogenous. If referentiality may appear as a fuzzy concept when dealing with adult language, the challenge is even greater when it comes to child language. Not only do children not fully master adult forms and meanings but adult-child

dialogues also show a certain amount of indeterminacy and uncertainty in the use of noun phrases. One possible (quite classical) way to address this issue would be to track children's development from indeterminate uses to a clear contrast between referential and nonreferential uses. However, such a stance implies the assumption of a linear development from an initial point to an ending point, that is, from a lack of referential skills to a clear distinction between specific reference, non-specific uses, generic uses, labelling uses, etc. However, as shown in other chapters in this book (see *i.a.* Thompson and Ono's work on the fluidity and indeterminacy of reference in everyday conversation), there are probably not such clear-cut boundaries in everyday dialogues. In that case, what do children acquire: a semantic/pragmatic contrast or the dynamics of fluctuation and fuzziness? We address this issue from an interactionist and dialogical approach (Bakhtin 1979/1986; Bruner 1983; Vygotsky 1934/1962).<sup>1</sup> According to this approach, children's discursive and pragmatic early skills are built from their "communicative experience", that is, both from their exposure to forms and meanings in adult discourse (frequent occurrences and unique events) and from their *in situ* involvement in the construction of a discursive space

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<sup>1</sup> In this text, "interactionist/interactionism" corresponds to the Vygotskian (Vygotsky, 1934/1962) and Brunerian (Bruner, 1983) conceptions of language and cognitive development. In that sense, the scopes of "interactionist" and "interactional" (as in interactional linguistics, Ochs *et al.*, 1996; Ford *et al.*, 2003) partially overlap.

emerging from the participants' utterances and actions (see Salazar Orvig *et al.* 2021).<sup>2</sup>

## 1 Referentiality and Nonreferentiality

Whereas referring may be one of the main functions of nominal expressions, it is a known fact that nouns are also produced in undisputable nonreferential uses (see among others Du Bois 1980). Beyond this first distinction, consensus about where to draw the boundaries between referential and nonreferential uses of linguistic expressions fades out (see Abbot 2014; Chen 2009; Du Bois 1980; Laury *et al.* this volume, *inter alia*). Among other dividing lines, studies on decontextualized examples tend to think of referentiality and nonreferentiality as a semantic or pragmatic property of the noun phrase whereas studies dealing with spontaneous data consider them as values that are actually built in discourse and interaction. Let us consider the case of indefinite noun phrases, which we will discuss later in this work. Indefinite NPs tend to be considered nonreferential in the

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<sup>2</sup> The use of “emerge” and “emergent” (as in Hopper, 1998, 2015, *inter alia*) aims at insisting on the fact that speakers do not deal with *a priori* values but with values under construction in the here and now of dialogue.

classic philosophical or semantic approaches. Even when individuals are concerned, the speaker “is merely indicating that he has a certain unspecified individual in mind. That is, he is not referring but merely alluding to that individual” (Bach 2008:28) or identifying he or she only by the denotation of the noun (what Gundel et al. (1993) call “type identifiable”). Depending on the authors these uses can fall either side of the boundary between referential and nonreferential uses. However, this feature is not in the NP *per se*. It is the result of the interaction with other features in the utterance, such as the verb’s action accomplishment. For instance, a modal construction will contribute to a non-specific interpretation of an indefinite NP (*I wanted to eat an ice cream*) whereas a verb at the past perfect tense points to an accomplished action, which dealt with concrete entities (*I ate an ice cream*). Therefore, even if the entity is poorly identifiable it has a concrete existence (the ice cream that was actually eaten). The verb contributes therefore to a referential reading of the indefinite NP. Moreover, this referential potential is enhanced when the indefinite NP contributes to tracking a referent in the ongoing discourse, and appears as the head of a co-referential chain (Chastain 1975; Du Bois 1980; Thompson 1997).

Until now we have considered the construction of meaning as a static phenomenon, one that would be induced by the meaning of units or their interactions. However, as research on discourse and interaction shows, the potential meanings of referring expressions are above all resources for

participants to play with the different perspectives from which referents and notions may be considered in the dialogue (Laury 2001, *inter alia*). This is the perspective we will adopt to address the issue of (non)referentiality in adult-child dialogues. Before presenting our data and method, we will recall how referential and nonreferential uses of NPs have been tackled in language acquisition studies.

## **2 (Non)referentiality in Child Language**

Concerning referentiality and nonreferentiality, language acquisition shows an even more complex landscape than adult language. When children begin to acquire their first words, they are involved in a complex process: while grasping words as means to achieve pragmatic goals (for instance, asking for food, showing an object or playing), toddlers are discovering and constructing both the act of reference (using language to represent an entity) and the communication means to refer. Reference and denotation are therefore deeply intertwined both in children's discursive productions and within the activities they are involved in, where adults frequently label objects before referring to them (Bruner 1975, 1983).

Previous studies on the acquisition of referential expressions did not directly address the issue of referentiality/nonreferentiality. They rather

focused on when and how children become able to use determiners (and pronouns) in accordance with their language rules, as part of the acquisition of grammatical paradigms (see for instance Bassano *et al.*, 2011), and then, from a pragmatic perspective, regarding the newness/givenness of the referent, and/or its specificity/non specificity (Salazar Orvig *et al.* 2013). The question of (non)referentiality is primarily related to this last aspect (see also Kupisch 2007).

Two types of studies on children's use of determiners can be distinguished: those adopting experimental methods and those working on natural data. Experimental methods (Bresson 1974; De Cat 2013; Karmiloff-Smith 1979, 1985; Maratsos, 1974, Schaeffer & Matthewson 2005; Schafer & de Villiers 2000) are based on the presentation of controlled stimuli. In production tasks, children are asked to produce or complete narratives, describe experimenter's actions, or encode specific referents; in comprehension tasks, children are asked to follow instructions or identify referents. Studies using natural data (Le Mené-Guigourès 2017; Rozendaal & Baker 2008; Salazar Orvig *et al.* 2013) are based on the analysis of corpora collected in everyday interactions. Some differences may be observed between both types of studies as regards to the theoretical perspectives and the age at which indefinite and definite determiners begin to be used according to their functions.

The authors of experimental studies explain this acquisition process in terms of cognition and memory, whereas corpora studies emphasize the



role of interaction, as it is the case in our own studies. An example of the first type is Karmiloff-Smith's research (1979, 1985), one of the most influential works in this perspective. According to this author, determiners (and pronouns) are cohesive devices and the changes in their uses can be understood only under a theoretical model that "focuses on internal processes and representations" (Karmiloff-Smith 1985: 62). For instance, in the 1985 study, children aged 4 were not yet able to organize their discourse by means of the contrast between definite/indefinite articles because the process is still stimulus driven and the definite determiners and pronouns had a deictic value. Yet, some – but not all – experimental studies also show that children as young as 3;6 can use indefinite determiners for specific reference (Schafer & De Villiers 2000).

In contrast, studies on corpora show that at the age of 2-3, children are able to make adult-like use of determiners as specific/non-specific reference (and newness/givenness of the referent) is concerned. In a wide review, Allen *et al.* (2015) consider these abilities as the outcome of the interplay between a plurality of factors: discourse-based and perceptually-based factors as well as communication demands. We propose that these (and possibly other) factors function within the framework of adult scaffolding and co-construction in the dialogue. This could explain the earliness of skills observed in studies on corpora compared to experimental ones.

We make the hypothesis that indeterminacy in children's first uses of nouns does not only reflect limitations on a reliable interpretation of children's utterances, but that it corresponds to the actual status of noun phrases in early adult-child dialogues and that referentiality (and nonreferentiality) precisely emerge from the dynamics of these dialogues in which children are involved. However, to our knowledge, there are no studies about (non)referentiality in the adult uses of NPs when talking to children. Two different questions can arise from the previous observations. First, the issue of (non)referentiality partly overlaps that of (in)definiteness: to which extent do children possess a contrast between specific and nonspecific reference? Second, considering labelling, to what extent do children experience a clear-cut difference between referring to an entity and labelling this entity?

This chapter aims to fill a gap in studies on early referential behaviors by providing a first description of the way children experience these values in dialogue and considering some hypothetical paths for the development of (non)referential uses of language.

### **3. Studying (non)referentiality: Data and Method of Analysis**

### 3.1 A Corpus of Adult-Child Interactions

The study was conducted on a corpus of video-recorded adult-child interactions involving 28 French-speaking children aged from 1;10 to 2;6. The recordings<sup>3</sup> were made during everyday activities (meal, snack), reading or playing activities (construction or symbolic games), and non-narrative activities with iconic material such as jigsaws or memory games.

The data collected were fully transcribed taking into account the interactions' multimodal dimension, and thus focused on verbal productions and also including gestures, gaze, body moves and orientations. In order to provide a faithful representation of the ongoing construction of children's linguistic system, their utterances were phonetically transcribed. The whole set of transcribed data was made up of 18045 utterances (adults' and children's productions together).

### 3.2 Identifying Dialogical Sequences to Examine (non)referentiality

In order to examine the way the dialogical and discursive context contributes to the construction of the value of a NP, be it referential or not, we set up a four-step procedure.

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<sup>3</sup> The corpus was gathered from various research projects (see Le Mené-Guigourès 2017; Salazar Orvig et al. 2021). In all these occasions parents and children were duly informed of the type of investigation conducted and gave their consent.

As a first step, we identified among the children's productions all the utterances (N=389) containing only one isolated NP, whether it was preceded with a determiner (example 1) or a filler (example 2)<sup>4</sup>, or produced without any pre-nominal form (example 3). We excluded any other combination of two words or more.

For readers unfamiliar with the French grammatical system, note that in French, the noun should, in most cases, be preceded by a determiner. Determiners are morphologically complex: the category is a relatively heterogeneous paradigm, made up of several subsets of determiners most often organised into two main categories: definite and indefinite determiners. It may be useful to specify here that grammars tend to establish that definite NPs present the referent as identifiable by the interlocutor, either through the linguistic context, the situational context or shared knowledge (or supposedly shared) between the speaker and the interlocutor. As opposed to definites, indefinite determiners would be used in cases where the referent of the noun could be any one of its category, cannot be identified by the interlocutor, when the information is new or when the speaker does not consider it useful to give the information. In addition, definites are the most typical form for generic values, both in singular (*la compote est un aliment sain*) and plural forms (*les compotes sont saines*)

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<sup>4</sup> Filler syllables are pre-nominal or pre-verbal syllables, which are precursors of grammatical morphemes (*inter alia*. determiners, pronouns, auxiliaries) both in pre-nominal and pre-verbal positions (see for instance Peters 2001; Veneziano 2003). In the examples, 'F' stands for a filler syllable.

and indefinites can only be used for generic values in dislocated constructions (*une compote c'est sain*), whereas English will use bare nouns (*compot is a healthy aliment; compots are healthy*).

(1) [Lisa, 1;11: *Determiner + Noun*]<sup>5</sup>

((Lisa and her father are playing with a small farm. Lisa picks up the farmer character.))

LIS9: [la dam] *la dame*

the lady

FAT9: *tu crois que c'est une dame ça ?*

you think this is a lady?

(2) [Madeleine, 1;09: *Filler + Noun*]

((Madeleine and her mother are jointly telling a Mr. Men story: Mr. Bump meets Mr. Forgetful.))

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<sup>5</sup> Example captions indicate the name of the child, his/her age (years; months). The first three letters of the child's first name are given in uppercase (*e.g.* LIS for Lisa), MOT stands for mother, FAT for father and ADU for another adult participant interacting with the child. The children's utterances are transcribed phonetically (between square brackets [ ]), the interpretation in French is given in italics. For both the adults and the children an approximate English translation is given in the next line. '/' stands for a pause, { } braces indicate an uncertain interpretation and 'xxx' is used to translate unintelligible productions. The interrogative sign ('?') codes a question and '!' codes an exclamative utterance. Indications about gestures and the situation are between double brackets ((( ))) and in italics.

MOT15: *mais le problème c'est qu'il est étourdi !*

but the matter is that he is dizzy!

MAD15: [ʒ bys] *F bus*

F bus

(3) [Clément, 2;03: *Noun*]

((Clément is playing with a jigsaw and pointing at one of the pieces.))

CLE40: [vwaty]? *voiture ?*

car?

The use of isolated NPs, with or without a determiner or filler, is a particularly distinctive feature of children's first stage of linguistic development, and of the transitional stage between this first stage of one-word utterances and the following two-word utterances stage (*inter alia* Clark 2009). As no other element in the utterance may help to determine whether the NP is associated with a referential or nonreferential value, these isolated NPs are potentially subject to various interpretations and only the context (both linguistic and related to the current situation) may help favor one interpretation rather than another.

As a second step, to grasp the way (non)referentiality may emerge from the dynamics of dialogue, we also focused on the complete thematic sequences in which they appeared. Therefore, we paid attention to

children's productions with regard to adults' productions and vice versa. These thematic sequences make up our data collection and the dialogical material discussed below. An example of how thematic sequences were identified is presented through excerpt 4. First, we identified the isolated NP produced by the child (line LUB492), and then, from this NP, we selected the whole sequence concerning the same discourse object, and in this case, the same piece of the jigsaw (an elephant piece). Ultimately, these sequences may encompass several occurrences of isolated NPs as seen in example 4.

(4) [Lubin, 1;11: *Thematic sequence*]

((Lubin and his father are playing with a giant jigsaw, manipulating pieces, and talking about the animals showing on them.))

FAT491: *ça c'est qui lui ?*

who is this one?

((pointing at the space dedicated to the elephant))

LUB492: [fã] (*éléphant !*)

elephant

FAT493: *l'éléphant*

the elephant

FAT494 : *oui*

yes

- LUB495 [xxx a]
- LUB496: [uʒ pa] (*b*)*ouge pas*  
 don't move  
 ((embedding the elephant piece))
- LUB497: [elefa] *éléphant*  
 elephant
- LUB498: [gaje] *gagné !*  
 well done!
- FAT499: *gagné !*  
 well done!

Then, as a third step, we examined how these thematic sequences were built up, considering both utterances that preceded and followed the children's isolated NPs. In particular, we explored the values of the different NPs within each sequence, by coding them according to three different categories: REFERENTIAL, NONREFERENTIAL, and INDETERMINATE. This coding drew on a body of both verbal and/or non-verbal evidence, which allowed us to favor one category (or value) over another. These categories and the information on which we based our coding are presented below.

If we were able to pinpoint one singular object (human or not) it referred to, then we coded it as REFERENTIAL. This coding decision was made possible only when 1) we had enough verbal cues to clearly identify this singular object, in the analysed utterance itself or in a



previous/following utterance (see example 5), 2) when non-verbal resources like gestures or gaze direction allowed targeting one particular object (see example 6), 3) when the material context and our knowledge of the situation provided a clear understanding of the participant communicative intention (see example 7). These cues showed in the data either separately or simultaneously.

For instance, in the example 5 below, the NP [kuku] (produced for ‘crocodile’) in LUB601 was coded as referential since both the father’s preceding question (*tu défais le crocodile?* ‘you undo the crocodile?’) and the child touching the jigsaw piece with his foot provided significant information to identify the specific crocodile both participants were playing with.

(5) [Lubin, 1;11: *Referential uses - Verbal cues*]

((Lubin and his father have just finished the jigsaw they were playing with.))

FAT600: *tu défais l(e) croco(dile) ?*  
you undo the crocodile?

LUB601: [kuku] *c(r)oco(dile)*  
crocodile

((trying to take the crocodile piece out of the puzzle board  
with his foot))

FAT602: *mais pas avec le pied avec la main*

but not with the foot with the hand

FAT603: *c'est / c'est compliqué avec le pied*

it's complicated with the foot

FAT604: *voilà*

there you go

Sometimes, as just noted, it is mainly the non-verbal context that helped identifying first what participants referred to, and therefore that the mention was referential. In example 6, Iris and her father are playing with a train, and the child says *l'autre* 'the other one', moving around looking for a train wagon she seems familiar with. The child's behavior suggests that the repeated mention *l'autre* does not refer to either a nonreferential or indeterminate object, but rather to a singular well-identified train wagon.

(6) [Iris, 1;11: *Referential uses - Non-verbal cues*]

IRI127: [lot] *l'autre*

the other one

IRI128: [lot e lot] *l'autre [xxx] l'autre*

the other one [xxx] the other one

FAT107: *là il est là*

here it's here

In some other instances, the coding decision was taken on the basis of our knowledge of the situation. In example 7 below, Elodie and her mother are playing with a construction game. Both ELO4 and ELO5 were coded as referential uses of the NP *Moulin*<sup>6</sup> since the child is actually looking for the specific helix she played with a few minutes before.

(7) [Elodie, 2;3: *Referential uses - Material context / Knowledge of the situation*]

ELO4: [a mulɛ̃] *F moulin*

F mill

ELO5: [u mulɛ̃] *F moulin*

F mill

MOT6: *le moulin il est là + tiens*

the mill is here + here you are

In contrast, in other cases, the discursive or the situational context oriented towards a labelling use of the NP. This is the case in the following

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<sup>6</sup> Note here that both the child and the mother use the noun 'moulin' (mill) to refer in fact to the helix of a mill. In the example (7), we decided to translate the word 'moulin' by 'mill', even though we know it is not the object that the participants are manipulating.

example (8) where Elodie's mother offers a labelling use of the noun *barrière* ('gate'), which is repeated by the child in the following turn.

In the same way, some uses could be interpreted as non-specific or generic.

In example 9 below, Clémence's mother produces a generic utterance about what cows eat, and the child takes up the generic NP '*la vache*' in CLE34.

(8) [Elodie, 2;2: *Labelling uses*]

((Elodie and her mother are playing with a small farm.))

MOT73: *c'est une barrière*

it's a gate

ELO48: [bajε̃] *ba(rr)ière*

gate

Labelling and non-specific/generic uses of NPs were both included in a NONREFERENTIAL coding category.

(9) [Clémence, 2;3: *Generic uses*]

MOT67: *et la vache qu'est-ce qu'elle mange? de l'herbe?*

and cows, what do they eat<sup>7</sup>? grass?

CLE33: [ɛb] *he(r)be*

grass

CLE34: [lavaç] *la vache*

the cow

Finally, when the participant's communicative intention was particularly difficult to grasp, and that we found no evidence enabling us to favor one of these two preceding values (REFERENTIAL or NONREFERENTIAL) over another, neither in the linguistic context nor in the current situation or personal knowledge of this situation, the NPs were coded as INDETERMINATE. Examples 11 (in section 4) or 15 (in section 5) provide clear illustrations of these kinds of ambiguous, indeterminate uses.

Having described both the data and the method we used to analyse these data, the next part of this study will now focus on the way children actually experience (non)referentiality. Our analysis will follow the central thread of dialogue and its role in constructing (non)referentiality, but through three different angles: first, to understand the uses children are exposed to, we had a look at the way adults use NPs in the dialogue; second, we focused on children's uses and analysed the role played by the preceding

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<sup>7</sup> As mentioned in section 1, in French, generics are expressed with definite NPs. In the English translation, we used either a plural bare noun or a definite NP to convey this generic value.

context in the construction of children's NPs values; and finally, we tried to capture what happens following children's NPs, and in particular, how the possible values of these NPs were taken up in the following turns of the sequence.

#### **4. Adult Uses of NPs in the Ongoing Dialogue**

As shown earlier, several studies focused on both referentiality and nonreferentiality. Yet very few of them examined the role of dialogue in the development of child's (non)referential uses of language or the type of uses children are exposed to in the language addressed to them. This is precisely what we did in this work: analysing adult uses to better understand children's uses.

Our first analysis showed that children are actually exposed to a great variety and variability of uses in everyday communication. The following example of dialogue between Serena (2 years and 3 months) and her mother provides a good illustration of how diverse and mixed adult uses can be.

(10) [Serena, 2;3: *Adult's variety of uses*]

((Serena is with her mother, having a snack (compote and cookies). She starts licking the lid of the compote jar.))

MOT14:     *oh ça tu aimes ça*  
              oh you like that

MOT15:     *qu'est-ce que c'est ça? c'est le + ?*  
              what's that? it's the +?)  
              ((touching the lid))

MOT16:     *comment ça s'appelle ça ?*  
              how do you call that?

((Serena looks at her mother and at the lid.))

MOT17:     *t'es coquine !*  
              you're mischievous!

SER2:       [*asasela*] *ah ça c'est {la/là}*  
              ah this is there  
              ((showing the lid))

MOT18 :     *ouais mais qu'est-ce que c'est ça ?*  
              yes but what's this?  
              ((touching the lid))

SER3:       [a compot] *F compote*  
              F compote

MOT19:     *la compote*  
              the compote

MOT20: *oui mais tu manges la compote dans le couvercle*

yes but you eat the compote in the lid

((tapping the lid))

((MOT puts a teaspoon in the pot of compote and brings it near SER.))

MOT21: *allez mange la compote là*

come on eat the compote there

[...]

((Later, Serena pushes the pot and grabs some cookies.))

SER16: [a zə vø le kado dabɔ̃ʁ] *ah je veux les gâteaux d'abord*

oh I want the cookies first

MOT 66: *tu manges les gâteaux d'abord ?*

you eat the cookies first?

((she takes the spoon and gives some compote to the child))

MOT67: *alors un peu de compote aussi*

then also some compote

((The mother makes the child eat the compote.))

MOT68: *parce que les compotes y a des fruits dedans*

because compotes have fruits inside

In these excerpts of an everyday activity, the mother displays two different expressions to refer to the COMPOTE (the demonstrative pronoun *ça* and the definite NP *la compote*) and, at the same time, various uses of the noun *compote*. She begins (MOT 15, 16 and 18) by asking her child to



identify or label what she is eating (or licking). The child answers with a noun associated with a filler [a]. The mother takes up the noun and reformulates the filler with a definite determiner *la* (MOT 19). The next occurrences refer to the content of the lid (MOT 20) and of the pot (MOT 21), with the referential value of the NP being reinforced by the deictic *là* ‘there’. In MOT 67, the bare noun in *alors un peu de compote* ‘then also some compote’ takes a mass value whereas in MOT 68, *parce que les compotes y a des fruits dedans* ‘because in compotes there are fruits inside’, *compote* has a generic value.

This example shows, in the first place, that children are, from early on, exposed to both referential and nonreferential uses of NPs. This example also highlights the fact that children do not necessarily experience, in the adults’ discourse, contrasts of forms conveying contrasts of values (for instance Serena’s mother uses mostly the definite determiner).

Moreover, forms in the adult discourse can be indeterminate, that is, they cannot be assigned with a given value. Their interpretation is driven by the discursive and dialogical context. Some forms, as for instance *la compote* (MOT 19) can be interpreted either as a nonreferential use (a way to label the referent) or as a referential use, introducing a referent that will be taken up in the next turns as in MOT 20 and 21.

In addition to these moves between referential and nonreferential uses, we found that some of the adult’s uses may be inherently multifaceted,

encompassing both referential and nonreferential potential values as in example 11.

(11) [Lubin, 2;6: *Adult's ambiguous uses*]

((Lubin is playing a card game, whose goal is to make pairs by combining animals and their living areas.))

LUB138: [ɔl e la sa mɛzɔ̃] *F est là sa maison*

his house is here

MOT139: *alors mon Lulu*

so my Lulu

ADU140: *la maison de qui ?*

whose house?

((Lubin assembles two cards that form a pair.))

ADU142: *oui*

yes

LUB143: [də mutɔ̃] *F mouton*

F sheep

ADU144: *ouais la maison du mouton c'est celle-là*

yes the sheep's house is this one

The adult (ADU) interacting with the child (LUB) makes use of linguistic forms which are usually associated with specific uses (such as the interrogative pronoun *qui* 'who' in ADU140 and the definite NP *la maison*

‘the house’ in ADU144), but for uses that are more likely to be generic (referring here to the whole class of the sheep). This kind of use is frequent in the data, and in particular when participants are playing with iconic material. The pictures on the cards stand both for a specific individual (the one represented in the picture and the piece of the game set) and for the whole category. For instance, in example 10 the adult’s question in ADU 140 concerns both the specific piece to be searched for and the construction of a general knowledge about the place sheep live in. And in both cases, they can be discussed by the dyads and result in indeterminate uses.

By analysing adult’s uses, to understand child’s uses, we could see that in everyday conversations, child-directed speech is composed of a great diversity of uses, sometimes alternating between referentiality and nonreferentiality – and yet verbalised with the same forms – and even to indeterminate uses with potentially multiple values. In the next section, we will take a closer look at the children’s uses of NPs by the children.

## **5 Child Uses of NPs : the Role Played by the Preceding Context**

As far as (non)referentiality is concerned, we have seen that a referential or nonreferential value is not given by or included in the linguistic units but

constructed through the context. From this perspective, our second analysis focused on the context preceding each NP produced by the child and on the way this context may impact both its form and the value to which it may be assigned.

Two different scenarios were observed. In the first one, the child's use was framed by the ongoing dialogue - for instance by a question of the adult. This pattern may be found in MOT18 in example 10 above, but also in FAT150 in example 12 below. In both cases, the adult's question elicited a labelling answer.

(12) [Lubin, 1;11: *Child's use framed by the dialogue*]

((Lubin and his father are playing with a jigsaw. The father points at one piece.))

FAT150: *c'est quoi ça ?*

what is this?

LUB151: [a ! eokε !] *ah ! (p)e(rr)oquet !*

ah! parrot!

FAT152: *oui un perroquet !*

yes a parrot!

The child's use was also framed by the ongoing activity and the discursive routines that are associated with the activity. In example 13, the

child and her mother were playing with a picture lotto game. Before placing the pictures on her lotto board, the child asked what was on the card she had picked up (cf. OLG12, OLG13b or OLG14b). The mother answered these labelling questions by naming what was shown on the pictures, and the child then repeated the mother's utterance. These NPs (OLG13a, OLG14a) are thus rooted in the activity, and shaped by the participants' recurring practices.

(13) [Olga, 2;4: *Child's use framed by the activity*]

((Olga and her mother are playing with a picture lotto game.))

OLG11: [sekwa ?] *c'est quoi ?*

what is this?

MOT13: *ça c'est un cerf-volant*

this is a kite

OLG12: [sekwa ?] *c'est quoi ?*

what is this?

MER14: *un soleil*

a sun

OLG13a: [ẽ solej] *un soleil*

a sun

OLG13b: [sekwa ?] *c'est quoi ?*

what is this?

- MER15:     *des pommes*  
               apples
- OLG14a:    [de pom] *des pommes*  
               apples
- OLG14b:    [sekwa ?] *c'est quoi ?*  
               what is this?
- MER16:     *un parapluie*  
               an umbrella

More generally, the child's use could be framed by the shared knowledge of the situation. In example 14, Iris and her father were playing with a train wagon. Both participants knew that the wagon had just rolled under the chair, giving the NP produced in IRI100, as well as the two NPs produced by the father in FAT87, a referential value. Unlike the apples and the umbrellas in example 13, these NPs correspond to representations of the chair, which is a concrete object under which the toy has just fallen.

(14) [Iris, 1;11: *Child's use framed by the shared knowledge*]

((Iris and her father are playing with a train wagon. The wagon has just rolled under the chair.))

- IRI100:     [ba! ʃɛz] *bah! chaise*  
               chair

IRI101: [a!] *ah!*

FAT87: *dessous la chaise dessous la chaise*  
under the chair under the chair

In the second scenario, the child's use was not framed by the context. This corresponds to occurrences appearing in the child's initiating moves, with non-inferable contextual elements (see examples 15 and 16), or in contexts considered as indeterminate, for instance when the adult's productions themselves are indeterminate (as in ADU140 in example 11).

(15) [Iris, 1;11: *Child's use not framed by the context*]

((Iris is playing with various toys. She picks the glasses of M. Potato, and tries to put them on her nose.))

IRIS23: [o nenɛt] *oh lunettes*  
oh glasses

FAT24: *elles sont trop petites pour toi*  
they're too small for you

In example 15, Iris was discovering different toys that the observer brought with her. She picked a pair of little glasses. The father was silent at that point of the interaction and her discovery did not constrain any particular type of discourse. Therefore, [*nenɛt*] can be interpreted either as a

labelling move (it could be rephrased as *'these are glasses'*) or as an existential utterance (it could be rephrased as *'there are glasses'*) or, else, she could be just calling the attention of her father on the glasses (which could then be rephrased by *'oh look glasses'*). We can observe that the father replies on the basis of a referential interpretation of the child's utterance (see section 5).

(16) [Alice, 1;11: *Child's use not framed by the context*]

((Alice lifts the carpet in front of her.))

ALI 56: [tapi !] *tapis !*

carpet!

MOT 53: *ça c'est un tapis*

this is a carpet

In example 16, Alice's use of *tapis* ('carpet') is an initiating move, and just as in the previous example (15), the value of the child's NP is indeterminate (again, no linguistic nor contextual cue allows to favor a referential or nonreferential value). It can be interpreted either as a labelling move (rephrased as *'this is a carpet'*) or as an existential utterance (rephrased as *'there is a carpet'*).



## 6 The evolution of the values of NPs in dialogue

In addition to the focus on preceding context, we also considered the values of the NP depending on the subsequent development of dialogue. In examples 15 and 16 discussed in the previous section, the adult's reply selects one of the interpretations, and the child's NP is taken up either in a referential utterance (*see* the anaphoric pronoun *elles* 'they' in FAT24, example 15) or a labelling utterance (MOT53 in example 16), which then shapes the dialogue towards a referential or nonreferential use. However, is this kind of phenomenon specific to the adult's reaction to indeterminate NPs, or can we find cues showing that all kinds of occurrences are processed in the same way? To answer this question, we examined the way the NPs were taken up and developed in dialogue.

We observed that the adult's subsequent contribution could serve four different functions. When the child's utterance was not ambiguous, the adult's utterance confirmed the child's value (see among others FAT152 in example 12) and when the child's utterance was indeterminate, the adult's contribution could either select a potential value (as in FAT24 in example 15), or maintain the indeterminacy (see FAT493 in example 4).

Very often adults do take up the NP produced by children, but in some cases the following dialogue stands on an implicit uptake. In example 17 below, the child also initiates the sequence with an indeterminate NP

(MAD147), but in this case the mother carries on the dialogue on the basis of a referential value of the child's NP. Even if in her reply (MOT148), the mother does not overtly take up the child's item *voiture* ('car'), the referent is inferable from the interaction of the previous context of the story (one of the characters, M. Bump, just missed a bus that would take him to the station) and the use of the predicate *emmener à la gare*, 'take to the station' which corresponds to an action that needs to be accomplished with a car. Therefore the existence of the car is implicitly confirmed together with the explicit reference to its driver (M. Forgetful) which is referred to with the third person pronoun *il* 'he'.

(17) [Madeleine, 1;9]

((Madeleine and her mother are reading a Mr Men book. The child turns the page and points at a car. Mr Bump is asking M. Forgetful (in the car) to take him to the train station.))

MAD146: [esa mamã !] *F ça maman !*

F this mum!

MAD147: [evwaty] *F voiture*

F car

MOT148: *tu vois il lui dit <est+ce+que vous pouvez m'emmener à la gare> [reported speech] ?*

you see he tells him could you take me to the station?

Example 18 exhibits a more complex configuration as it shows that adults can follow up a child's indeterminate NP with different values. Alice's first utterance is indeterminate (ALI 31); again it can be interpreted either as a labelling utterance (which could be rephrased as '*it is a button*') or as an existential utterance (which could be rephrased as '*there is a button*'). The mother (MOT 32) selected the labelling value by giving the child the expected label, '*it's a velcro*'. We can observe in this utterance and in the following one that the demonstrative pronouns *c* 'it' and *ça* 'this/that' convey the reference to the object under their joint attention.

ALI 32 is a second indeterminate utterance (*[pa butɔ̃]* 'no button'), which again can be interpreted as a labelling utterance (which could be rephrased by "*it is not called button*") or a non-specific use of the noun (possibly rephrased as "*there is no button here*"). The mother's reply (MOT 33) selected the second value. This example illustrates a very frequent scenario in our data: the values of NPs are continuously fashioned by the ongoing dialogue.

(18) [Alice, 1;11]

((Alice is playing with the shoes of a doll.))

ALI3:            *[butɔ̃] bouton*  
                   *button*

- MOT32: *regarde c'est un velcro tu vois hop. comme ça ça tient*  
 look it's a velcro you see there you go. it sticks this way
- ALI32: [nɔ̃ nɔ̃ pa butɔ̃] *non! non! pas bouton*  
 no! no ! no button
- MOT33: *non il n'y a pas de bouton sur cette poupée*  
 no there's no button on this doll

Our last example (19) shows that indeterminacy can in some cases be maintained over several turns. In example 19 below, the child (CLE) is playing with her mother and brother (GEO) a card game where they have to match the picture of an animal with the picture of its usual feed.

(19) [Clémence, 2;3]

((Clémence is playing a card game with her mother and brother.))

- CLE14: [ẽ lapẽ] *un lapin*  
 a rabbit
- MOT29a: *un lapin !*  
 a rabbit!
- MOT29b: *le petit lapin*  
 the small rabbit
- MOT29c: *qu'est-ce qu'il mange un lapin Clémence ?*  
 what does a rabbit eat Clémence?
- MOT29d: *tu sais Geoffroy ?*

- you know Geoffroy?
- GEO14: *des carottes*  
carrots
- MOT30: *oui*  
yes
- CLE15: [imãz de fit] *i(l) mange des frites*  
it eats fries
- MOT31: *pas des frites Clémence ! <sourire>*  
not fries Clémence! ((smile))
- GEO15: *mais mais elle est là la carotte*  
but but the carrot is here
- MOT32a: *regarde Clémence il l'a trouvée Geoffroy la carotte*  
look Clémence, Geoffroy found the carrot
- MOT32b: *tu la mets avec le lapin ?*  
you put it with the rabbit?
- GEO16: *là à côté*  
here beside

In CLE14, the child first mentions the card of a rabbit by saying *un lapin* ('a rabbit'). As other cases presented here (examples 11, 15 or 16), this utterance is typically indeterminate, and can be interpreted either as an existential utterance (which could be rephrased as "*there is a rabbit*") or as a labelling move (rephrased as "*this is a rabbit*"). The mother's first

utterance MOT29a maintains the indeterminacy and could be interpreted in both ways. Even though in her second utterance, MOT29b, the mother switches to a definite NP with the adjective *petit* ('little'), this utterance could still, to a lesser extent, be considered potentially as a new label (since no cue allows here to pinpoint one singular rabbit more than the whole category). In MOT29c, *qu'est-ce qu'il mange un lapin Clémence ?* ('what does a rabbit eat Clémence?'), the use of an indefinite NP in a dislocated construction is usually considered generic in French (de Cat, 2007).

However, in the context of this card game, the question prompts the children to look for a specific card. The brother's contribution in GEO14 answers the question with an indefinite NP that maintains the generic value (*des carottes* 'carrots') but in GEO15 the brother locates a specific card. The following contributions by the mother (MOT32a and MOT32b) confirm this specific referential value.

This example not only provides a good illustration of both child and adult's indeterminate utterances (which can be observed through multiple turns), but also highlights the co-construction of changing values, within the dynamics of dialogue and within the framework of activities, leading to distinctive discourse genres, and uses of NPs.

## **7 Discussion**

In the introductory sections (sections 1 and 2) we saw that one dividing line between approaches of (non)referentiality is the way the value of the NP is ascribed: is it by its form, by its context and/or by its usage? We saw also that experimental studies tend to consider that young children do not possess the contrast between referential and nonreferential uses of nouns, whereas results of studies on dialogue tend to show evidence of an early pragmatic competence. Our aim in this study was not to assess the existence of early pragmatic skills, but rather to explore the way children experience referential and nonreferential values, both as speakers and as interlocutors. The qualitative analysis of the thematic sequences containing isolated NPs underscored that the values of NPs take shape in the interaction, and are framed both by the situational and linguistic context, for the children as well as for the adults interacting with them.

As seen, the function of adults' contributions is twofold. They have a retroactive effect on the child's utterances by selecting or confirming a potential interpretation of the NP and, at the same time, they set the ground for the subsequent dialogue. These contributions thus show both the adult's involvement within the discursive space, and interactional cues that the child can use to grasp how his/her preceding utterances were interpreted by the interlocutor. By constructing his/her own turns from these interpretations of the child's utterances, the adult contributes to the very

progressive process of constructing the child's consciousness of referential and nonreferential values.

Our findings might also shed a new light on the results of experimental studies. Let's return to the contradiction between Karmiloff-Smith (1979, 1985) and Schafer and de Villiers (2000). The former concluded that young children did not possess the multifunctionality of determiners and that they tended to use indefinite determiners only for labelling and non-specific values whereas the latter found uses of indefinite determiners for specific ones. Without claiming that young children possess adult-type skills, our observations suggest that children might take in the adults usage as an example. Moreover, in the everyday interactions we analysed, children do not have the opportunity to observe contrasting uses of NPs for referential and nonreferential values. On the contrary, they experience non-homogeneous uses by adults. This does not imply that adults do not have canonical skills. When talking to children, adults are in a particular position: they fully take part in the activity (for instance, playing with children or feeding them) and, at the same time, they scaffold the children's involvement in the activity and their use of language (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). For instance, in the early mother-child dialogues, labelling has a much higher prevalence than in any other type of dialogue, even more so than in adult-adult interactions. In these dialogues children are therefore frequently exposed to back and forth moves from referential uses to labelling uses.



In the same vein, we can make the assumption that the children's and adults' uses of NPs are determined by the activities and speech genres they are involved in. In previous studies we showed that activities and genres impact children's and adults' uses of referring expressions (de Weck *et al.*, 2021; Le Mené *et al.*, 2023; Salazar Orvig *et al.*, 2018; Vinel *et al.*, 2021). Some of the sequences studied here suggest that some playing activities may favor labelling moves (examples 12 or 13) and others foster some level of indeterminacy between generic and specific uses of NPs (examples 11 or 19).

Therefore, the models children are exposed to do not necessarily correspond to the canons experimental studies target. The construction of adult-like uses of referring expressions probably involves a more complex process of language socialization and exposure to a greater diversity of interlocutors, activities and speech genres (de Weck *et al.*, 2019).

Other questions remain. First, do the uses of NPs change along with language development? We did not consider an age variable in our data, because at these ages the individual variability in linguistic development can override the chronological age. So we might ask if the different types of sequences we highlighted here appear at the same time in the course of linguistic and dialogical development of the child. Moreover, we approached the data from a formal starting point, the occurrences of isolated NPs that are particularly distinctive of children's first stage of linguistic development. Even if we showed that mothers' NPs also present some

indeterminacy, does the acquisition of grammar and syntax reduce the proportion of indeterminate NPs?

Second, still with regard to the issue of language development, we might wonder whether dyads' uses tend to be progressively more homogeneous, selecting one value all along a thematic sequence, or whether this variability precisely characterises adult-child dialogues at all ages (and to go further, we might even wonder if it does characterise any dialogue). We did not observe age related differences in our corpus, but of course we worked on a narrow range of age. Complementary longitudinal studies should be conducted to answer this question.

## **8 Conclusion**

This chapter proposed a first exploration of the dynamics between referentiality and nonreferentiality (and all the intermediate values between these two opposite bounds) in adult-child dialogues.

Our analyses showed that, in dialogue, children and adults' NP occurrences have neither predetermined nor stable values. Referentiality or nonreferentiality may be considered as values constructed in the dialogical context rather than features of the NP itself. The values of NPs are co-

constructed through the verbal and non-verbal contributions of the participants, both child and adult, within the ongoing activity and on the basis of previous discourse. At the same time the result of this co-construction is not necessarily permanently set. Indeed, the data suggest that the possible interpretations of an NP are the outcome of an unstable balance. Potential values may emerge or re-emerge along with new utterances, and the same NP may support another value in the same topical sequence when participants switch from one perspective to the other.

This variability reflects the multifacetedness of NP uses and thus, sheds some light on the issue of referentiality and nonreferentiality, at least from the acquisitional perspective. Children do not experience a clear-cut contrast between different uses or values. On the contrary they seem to experience (both in the adult discourse and in the way adults react to their utterances) the fact that noun phrases potentially present various facets, which can be successively or simultaneously activated in dialogue. And this experience at the level of the micro-temporality of one single interaction feeds the cumulative experience that constitutes the macro-temporality of the child's development.

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