Interrogating Person Reference as a Marker  
of Conversational Genres

*Irina Wagner*

*Synthesis Proposal*

My synthesis paper will explore the connections between person reference in interaction and interaction as a continuum of conversational genres. While the previous research on person reference is quite abundant, studies examining the macro structure of interaction seem to engage with smaller categories. Concerned with the organization of talk, conversation analysis defines and outlines the structure of a conversation down to the most minimal detail (e.g., Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). In general, beyond the adjacency pairs and sequences, there seems to be no term encompassing a span of talk: in his investigation of sequence types and coherence, Schegloff refers to “clumps” of talk and “spate” of conversation (Schegloff, 1990). Importantly, those terms tend to capture the structural features of a conversation. With regards to the topic of an interaction, as Schegloff notes, the thematic coherence is also achieved by consistent reliance on the sequential organization of a conversation. Meanwhile, other disciplines studying text[[1]](#footnote-1) productively use the concept of genre to delineate the differences in structure, theme, and reception of a text. Here I propose a concept of conversational genres as an effective analytical tool for the linguistic and socio-cultural investigation of naturally occurring conversations, and I demonstrate the category of person reference as an indicator of such genres.

Theories of genre dominate in the literary studies but have also been adopted in linguistic anthropology where genre allows to account not only for the organization of speech acts, styles or events, but also trace their meaning in social practice through the understanding of intertextuality (Briggs & Bauman, 1992). Being produced and reproduced, certain genre forms may have specific effects in the speech community by triggering the available ideologies and relating them to the previous discourse (Bakhtin 1986). So narrative genres in particular, Hyvärinen (2015, p. 181) suggests, “function as *frames of orientation* [sic] for the language users themselves within certain social practices.” In other words, the main advantage of employing genre in analysis is the ability not only to categorize text or performance, but also observe their meaning and reception by a speech community.

Similarly, my proposal of conversational genres focuses on the link between the text and structure of face-to-face talk and the meaning it forces onto the speakers and their speech community. While such CA concepts as sequence type and speech action indirectly respond to the issues of generic classification and social effect, they do not fully capture multi-unit sequences which create and maintain important social discourses. Relying on the previous work in genre studies, I define conversational genre as a continuum of idealized conventions of single or multi-unit conversational sequences which share similar organizational structure, style, and register, evoke similar response from the recipients, and are subject to interpretation in the moment of speaking in connection with any previous discourses and ideologies. This definition provides three distinct gravitational poles for conducting further analysis: a) by suggesting that the conversational genres are not strictly categorical, this approach adopts the view of emergent conversation; b) it connects the conversation to the sociocultural realm which is not achieved by any other analytical tools of CA; and c) it incorporates the issue of intertextuality in the understanding of the message and the expected response. Importantly, proposing that conversational genres form a continuum emphasizes the fluidity of conversations and foregrounds the negotiations done by the interlocutors at the moment of speaking. It is my hypothesis that while conversational genres may have some distinct features, speakers are free to modify them in the progression of talk to fit their needs.

Registers and genres are reported to have an effect on the reference terms due to their access to previous information and establishment of certain connections between the speaker, addressee, and the referent (Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986; Harkness, 2015). Previous studies in ethnography of communication and discourse analysis pay close attention to registers and genres, attending to particular linguistic repertoires and features as defining.

For example, reported speech is often cited to distinguish between narrative and turn-by-turn talk (Rühlemann, 2013; Tannen, 2010). Tannen (2010) suggests that the use of reported speech, or constructed dialog, in written and spoken registers allows speakers to organize and structure their interactions and narratives. They also add a dramatic effect to the narration, causing immediacy of the telling. Similarly, Ruhlemann (2013) explores the pathos of the constructed dialogue and quotations as contributing to the boundaries of embedded discourse (120): he argues that through reported speech speakers can intertwine perspectives and easily navigate between them. Such discourse presentation is possible by using the linguistic feature of quotation and paralinguistic feature of silence to frame and organize the interaction. These features establish boundaries of discourse that allow the recipients to comprehend the perspectives of the narrator and the invoked characters.

Similarly, previous studies in ethnography of communication also note the influence of registers and linguistic repertoires on the discourse genre and the social practice activated by it. So Hanks (1987) in his study of the early colonial documents of Maya in Mexico, draws the connection between the style used in the documents and the authority they were appealing to. In his analysis, Hanks suggests that the Mayan authors intentionally mixed registers and used ambiguous time references to establish the discourse genre that is more appealing to the colonial audience and that reinforces Mayan authority. With this, Hanks argues, different discourse genres employed in the official documents served particular social practice, engaging with the linguistic repertoires of both the authors and the audience. The purpose of my study is to investigate if the same can be said about conversational genres.

Overall, the organization of interaction has not been widely studied with respect to different genres and their boundaries. Yet, it has been established that certain linguistic features affect the genre and its meaning, which at their turn modify the social work and practice accomplishable by the discourse. Although there is no previous research indicating that person reference terminology can be one of the linguistic variants influencing genre, as a feature so tightly connected with cultural and social relations, it is my hypothesis that it is also an organizing feature of interaction.

The study of person reference in conversation analysis widely defines the ways that speakers and addressees establish identity and refer to third persons. Studies indicate that the choice of a person reference form depends on different factors, but most importantly, the structure of a conversation. Importantly, in outlining the rules for person reference in conversations, two major tendencies in approaching this topic prevail: the investigation of form of the reference and the investigation of its social meaning.

In their foundational article, Sacks and Schegloff (1979) report that speakers use two major principles in choosing a form of reference: the principle of recognition (choose the most recognizable reference term) and economy (choose the most minimal form of reference). Laying the ground for further research, this study is especially interested in explaining the form of the person reference, and thus, suggests that depending on the position of the reference, its form would differ. Similarly, Fox (1987) notes that conversational structure is also important for the form of person reference: her analysis shows that while the turn is still open, speakers tend to use anaphoric mentions, but new and closed segments usually lead to less anaphoric and larger terms. In talking about the form of reference, the key to understanding it becomes the conversational preference, which is not necessarily the most frequently used pattern, but rather the pattern that has fewer dispreferred reactions.

While for Sacks and Schegloff preference is defined by minimization and recognition, other research demonstrates that cultural practices also shape the choice of the reference term. So, Levinson (2007) demonstrates that speakers of Yeli Dene often avoid certain reference forms when these are in direct conflict with cultural norms. So, in order to refer to her father-in-law, a woman must avoid words and phrases containing sounds of his name, nonetheless, she still can refer to him by some other words and even gestures. This principle of circumspection seems to be rooted in the cultural understandings of name and naming practices, yet for the Yeli Dene, the reference by name is still a preferred practice. Sidnell (2007) also notes that culture cues into the recognition part of referring and indicates that study of repair can explain how the recognitionality is achieved in specific linguistic and cultural situations. One of the most important of Sidnell’s findings draws the connection between repair of reference and the organization of talk: he argues that repair is a generic form of conversational organization dependent on many language-specific practices. In particular, Sidnell shows that certain reference terms invite repair and with it influence the structure of the interaction. Moreover, the data argues that speakers adapt to recurrent interactional patterns, such as frequent repairs, for example, due to the social and demographic factors (308).

Although reference by name is usually considered default or unmarked, Hanks (2007) argues that the preferentiality in reference depends on the culture. He investigates the established connections between the referents and speakers and addressees suggesting that each person reference form is an aware choice that reflects on the social practice of the people involved in interaction. As a result, the preference for association leads to preferring kin terms instead of names in some cultures. Enfield (2007) further suggests that the more marked referential terms foreground reference making it especially important. The issue of markedness and preferentiality demonstrates that beyond the grammatical issues of reference, it serves an important social function, in particular, the display of relation and importance of the third person.

Finally, other studies also demonstrate that the action of the turn contributes to the type of reference used, meaning that performing different social actions in conversations speakers are able to better ground their stance by using particular types of references (Downing, 1996; Stivers, 2007). In other words, previous studies of person reference in conversations demonstrate it to be a complex grammatical feature dependent on several conversational practices. However, while previous research asks the questions of grammar, relationality, cultural appropriateness, or the action, they usually fail to address the issue of discourse and discourse organization ignoring the overall structure and genre of a conversation.

# Proposed Synthesis

The main goal of my research is to connect notions of person reference and discourse and suggest the correlation between the types of references and the conversational genre. The main questions that this paper attempts to answer are a) whether there are larger structural units of conversation beyond TCU’s and adjacency pairs that form very particular grammatical and social constructions; and b) whether one can trace the genre difference through the variation in reference terms used. Ultimately, this research will suggest that beyond the minimal adjacency pairs and TCU’s, conversations are also structured to account for particular genre and thus exhibit particular grammatical features. Understanding the limits of the conversational genres allows one to categorize the broader social work of the interaction and connect it to the cultural and institutional achievements in conversation.

To support the theoretical claims drawn from the previous research, this paper will use examples from conversations in English, Russian, and Arapaho (DuBois et al., 2000-2005; Stepanova et al. 2007-2012; Cowell, 2000-2016). The data used for this project comes from different open access corpora of conversations and is limited to unscripted naturally occurring conversations between native speakers of these languages. While I am mainly interested in the Arapaho conversations and person references, the contrast with Russian and English (if any) will be helpful for any further generalizations.

The paper will be organized as follows: at first, I propose the idea of a spectrum of conversational genres based on the previous works on narrative in conversation and conversational discourses. Next, I present the previous research on person reference in conversation analysis. Third, I demonstrate the use of reference terms across the spectrum of conversational genres and argue that such use both develops and defines particular these genres. I suggest that although the conversational genres cannot be clearly distinguished, they are best explained as a continuum of different genres that correlate with linguistic repertoires and social practices of the speakers.

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1. I use “text” as a universal term referring to any spoken, mediated, and written information that could be of interest to studying language in use. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)