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The Chinese Third-Person Pronoun in Spoken Discourse

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A. Introduction

Although numerous studies have been done of Chinese anaphora in discourse and of the Mandarin third-person pronoun ta as an anaphoric device (e.g., Tai 1978, Li & Thompson 1979, 1981, Chen 1984, 1986, 1987, Cheng 1988), the different functions that ta can perform in various types of discourse have not been investigated. In this paper I offer an examination of two kinds of ta used almost exclusively in spoken discourse and virtually not in written discourse and propose a pragmatic explanation for this discrepancy between discourse types.

B. Extended Reference

Chao (1968) notes the prevalence and versatility of the third-person ta in Chinese speech. Among other things, Chao contrasts the restricted and unrestricted uses of ta, the former relating to animate, personified, or semi-personified references and the latter, to inanimate and non-personified references. He states that the unrestricted use of ta "in written [baihua 'vernacular Mandarin'] is completely unrestricted as to scope of reference and position in the sentence" (634). Example (1) illustrates the unrestricted use of ta with an inanimate and non-personified referent.

(1) (from Chao 1968:634)
1 Wulixue shì ziran kexue li de zui jiben de yi physics be nature science in NOM SUP basic NOM one
2 men kexue. Ta shì ben xiao xuesheng de bi M science 3s be this school student NOM required
3 xiu ke zhi yi. study subject POSS one
Physics is a most basic science among the natural sciences. It is one of the required courses in this school.

To Chao, this unrestricted use is a phenomenon specific to written discourse. For the same kind of use in spoken discourse, a demonstrative or the full NP would be employed. Chao states that "[i]n ordinary speech one would use [zhe 'this'] or [na 'that'] or repeat the noun rather than use ta" (634). This statement implies that the unrestricted use of ta does not occur in ordinary speech, of which casual conversation should be the canonical type.

What I find in my conversational data is rather a
different picture. The inanimate and non-personified use of \textit{ta} does occur in conversation. However, these occurrences often involve what Krenn (1987) calls extended reference, i.e., reference to non-discrete entities in discourse. Krenn states that "extended reference is the process of selecting a portion of information given situationally or activated by the foregoing discourse and of assigning it the status of a 'higher-order entity'" (124). Indeed, for many cases of the \textit{ta} used in conversation for inanimate reference, the identity of the referent is either the entirety or a portion of the propositional content of the preceding discourse. In other words, in these cases it is difficult or impossible to identify any nominal in the preceding discourse as the coreferring antecedent of the \textit{ta} in question. Thus, in conversation, a typical inanimate \textit{ta} whose referent is a non-discrete entity is quite different from the one in (1), which has a nominal as coreferring antecedent which in turn refers to a discrete entity (physics) in the extralinguistic world.

The extended reference \textit{ta} typically occurs before the predicate in a clause and is most often followed by a copula or an existential \textit{you} 'have'. Example (2) illustrates the co-occurrence of \textit{ta} with a copula.

(2) (SJS) (On the pangs of childbirth)
1B. Keshi weishenme yiding yao t-, yiding yao tong but why have to want have to want pain
2 cai neng sheng? Wo bu dong. Wo juede only then able labor I NEG understand I feel
3 weishenme why
4Z. Yinwei ta, shou, bu shi tong, because 3s contract NEG be pain
5 jiu shuo ta haoxiang shi zigong shousuo, that is say 3s seem be uterus contract
6 shousuo ba ni xiaohai ji chulai. contract BA you baby squeeze out come
7B. Dui dui, wo shuo wo shuo weishenme xianzai jiran right right I say I say why now since
8 you bie de fangfa weishenme weishenme yiding have other NOM method why why have to
9 yao jingguo tong cai yao ... want go through pain only then want
B. But why does (one) have to, have to undergo the pangs of labor? I don't understand. I wonder how come
Z. Because it, con-, (it's) not pain, that is it seems to be the contractions of the uterus, the contractions squeeze out your baby.
B. Right, right. I mean I mean whv, since there're
other ways nowadays, why why does (one) have to undergo the pangs [of childbirth]?

The underlined ta at line 5 in Z's speech is best construed as referring to the process of childbirth, the topic of the preceding and current segments. Another example, in which the underlined ta is used for extended reference and the verb is the existential you 'have', follows:

(3) (MSB) (On workers' medical insurance in China)
1F. yi xie gongchang ne he Beijing de mei yi ge one PL factory PRT and Beijing POSS each one M
2 yiyuan dou suowei tamen jiao 'guagou' jiu hospital all so called they call hook up that is
3 shuo you yiding de lianxi, jiu shuo ni zhe say have certain NOM contact that is say you this
4 wu ge gongchang you shenme maobing na five M factory have whatever problem then
5 yiding jiu qu nei yi ge yiyuan suoyi ta you certainly then go that one M hospital so 3s have
6 zhei yang zhijie de lianxi.
this kind direct NOM contact

F. Some factories have what they call a 'hook-up' with the hospitals in Beijing, that is, they have certain arrangement, that is if (any worker) in these five factories has any illness then (s)he will be sent to a particular hospital so <it has>/there is such a kind of direct contact [between factories and hospitals].

Typically, the extended reference ta, with a non-discrete entity as referent, is not seen in written discourse, especially not in essays; rather, a different phrasing involving use of a full NP or the demonstrative zhe 'this' as a proximal indexical, will be used to convey the same propositional content. The frequent use of ta for extended reference in spoken discourse and its virtual absence from written discourse lead one to speculate for a pragmatic account. In this respect, examination of another type of ta used in spoken discourse provides some clues. I turn to discuss this type now.

C. Immediate Adjacency with Coreferring Nominal

Another type of ta seen frequently in conversation but almost never in written discourse is the ta that immediately follows its coreferring nominal. Consider (4), which is an example with an inanimate coreferent.

(4) (QNS) (On how bottles are handled differently in Taiwan and in America.)
Taiwan ta, pingzi shou huiqu na Meiguojiu
Taiwan 3s bottle collect return and America then
ba ta da sui Taiwan ta jiu yong shui chong
BA 3s break broken Taiwan 3s then use water rinse
yi chong.
one rinse
P. Taiwan <ta>, after bottles are collected and returned, in America (these bottles) would be crushed but in Taiwan <it> (these bottles) would just be rinsed out [and used over again].

Like the extended reference ta, this type of ta and its immediately preceding coreferring nominal typically occur before the predicate in a clause. This kind of coreference is almost pure repetition and thus redundant, and the prevalence of this use in conversation is probably related to the characteristics of conversation as a mode of communication. Although semantically and syntactically redundant, the immediately adjacent coreference has the effect of emphasizing or highlighting the nominal, somewhat akin to the emphasis provided by underlining or italicizing in writing. This discourse function for highlighting what has just been said is apparently motivated by the need for interactional effectiveness in a communicative mode which is characteristically spontaneous and instantaneous.

The immediate juxtaposition of the nominal antecedent and ta is also seen for cases in which the referent is animate. Consider (5):

(5) (MSB) (On workers' medical care in China)
1F. Xiang gongchang zhei yang de difang: name gongren
like factory this M NOM place then worker
2 ta shi xiangshou mianfei de yiliao.
she enjoy free NOM medical treatment
F. Take places like factories for example: the workers <he>/(they) enjoy free medical care.

The emphatic effect brought forth by the pronominal ta, however, is not directed to the referential details of the referent; rather, because this type of ta typically co-occurs only with a nominal which is at a pre-predicate position, what is being highlighted by ta is the topicality of the referent with respect to the propositional content of the current discourse segment. Cases involving explicit disagreement in number between the antecedent nominal and the coreferring ta provide further evidence. Consider (6):

(6) (MSB) (On the differences between Chinese medicine
and Western medicine)

1F. You shi yuanlai shuo de nei ge wenti. Zhong again be original say NOM that M question Chinese

2 Xi yi ta zai zhei ge zhexue fangmian zai West medicine 3s at this M philosophy aspect at

3 yi xie, eh dui shiqing de jieshi fangmian zuofa one PL M eh to thing NOM explain aspect method

4 fangmian you hendo butong. aspect have many difference

F. It is the same old question we talked about before. Chinese medicine and Western medicine, <it>/they are very different in philosophy, in, eh, the ways things are explained, and in methodology.

In Chinese, the morphological distinction for number is marked for animate referents, but is neutralized when the referent of a pronoun is inanimate. It can be argued, then, that (6) does not prove anything. However, there are numerous examples in which the antecedent nominal has an animate referent and is explicitly marked for plurality, but is immediately followed by the singular ta rather than the plural tamen. The plurality of the antecedent nominal with an animate referent in (7) is manifested by the measure word for plurality, xie, in line 1. Yet, the nominal is followed by ta, not by the plural tamen.

(7) (MSB) (On the lack of scientific evidence supporting the credibility of acupuncture)

1F. Suoyi, suoyi you yi xie zhe anzhao, eh, zhei ge so so have one PL M this follow eh this M

2 Xifang chuantong xunlian chulai de ren ta West tradition train out come NOM person 3s

3 jiu bu xiangxin. then NEG believe

F. So, so there're some people who were trained according to, eh, the Western tradition, <he>/they don't believe [in acupuncture].

Similarly, the nominal with an animate referent in (8) encompasses the quantifier henduo 'many', but it is immediately followed by ta, rather than tamen.

(8) (MSB) (On the lack of scientific evidence supporting the credibility of acupuncture)

1F. Suoyi:, un, henduo: fandui zhenjiu de ren so um many oppose acupuncture NOM person

2 ne, ta: keyi: wanguan ba ta zhe yi bi mosha PRT 3s can completely BA 3s this one brush erase
shuo ta mei you shenme mei you shenme yong quan
say 3s NEG have some  NEG have some use complete
dou shi renmen naozi li xiang chu lai de
all be person PL brain in think out come NOM
ing
F. So:, um, many; people who oppose acupuncture,
<he>/they: can: disregard it [i.e., acupuncture]
completely and say it has no, no use and it is
just something made up by people from their head.

This discrepancy in number agreement gives rise to a
question about the function of ta in these contexts.
Does ta still operate in its anaphoric capacity for
coreferring? It seems that, while manifesting the
discourse function for highlighting the topicality of
its antecedent, this kind of ta has at the same time
lost its canonical grammatical function as an indicator
of the singularity of its coreferent.

D. A Comparison to the Second-Person Pronoun
A parallel can be drawn between the kind of ta
discussed in Section C and the interactional use of the
second-person pronoun in Chinese spoken discourse,
which I discussed elsewhere (Biq, ms.). Consider (9),
which is an example where the Chinese second-person
singular is used as a parenthetical address to call the
addressee's attention to the speaker's upcoming speech.

(9) (MSB) (On the lack of medical care for Chinese
peasants)
1F. nongmin jibenshang haishi, debudao yiyao zhaogu,
peasant basically still cannot get medical care
2 ye tebie shi zai pianpide difang, ni
also especially be at remote place you
3 birushuo:, Zhongguo de guoqu jiu you zheige
for example China DE past just have this M
4 wenti:,
problem
F. Basically the peasants still couldn't get medical
care, especially in remote places, <You> for
example:, in the past China had this problem:,

The interactional use of the second-person pronoun has
been found in spoken discourse only, and, regardless of
the number of intended recipients, the singular ni,
rather than the plural nimen, is always used in this
capacity; thus, the indexicality reflected in the
interactional use is different from the indexicality
normally found in the propositional use. The
interactional ni is used as a collective indexical,
referring to the intended recipient(s) as a group. It
refers to the participant role of the intended
recipient(s), rather than to the individual(s) in that role. It is the role of intended recipient(s), as opposed to the role of speaker, that is being called upon. Who is in that role is insignificant.

The use of the third-person singular 

 as a device for highlighting the topicality of the coreferring nominal in the current discourse segment is analogous to the interactional use of the second-person singular ni. When used in immediate adjacency to its coreferring nominal, 

 points to this antecedent as the topic of the current segment, rather than to the actual, extralinguistic referential details of the nominal. Thus, the number distinction is considered irrelevant. This 

 is still anaphoric, but is different from the propositional kind of anaphora that a third-person singular pronoun normally suggests in its canonical uses. In other words, when 

 is used as a highlight for the immediately preceding, coreferring nominal in conversation, its discourse function overshadows its referential function.

E. Topicality and Re-presentation

At the end of Section B I suggested the need for a functional explanation of the frequent occurrence in conversation but virtual absence in essay writing of the extended reference 

. In reference to the highlighting function of the second type of 

, the 

 in immediate adjacency with the coreferring nominal, we can say that the extended reference 

 demonstrates itself as a similar case in which the discourse function overshadows the grammatical/referential function.

The extended reference 

 is a token for conveniently re-presenting the topic of the preceding discourse in a simpler and shorter form. In other words, a simple 

 re-presents the topic of the preceding speech, which remains the significant given information of the current speech. The fact that the extended reference 

 most frequently precedes the predicate in a clause is an indication that the recapitulation of the foregoing speech is deemed the significant given information, or simply the topic, of the ongoing speech. If the 

 immediately adjacent to the coreferring nominal is like underlining or italicizing in writing, then the extended reference 

 is probably like a shorthand symbol.

F. Anaphora, Communicative Mode, and Paradigmatic Competition

Just as in the case where 

 immediately follows the coreferring nominal, the extended reference 

 is still anaphoric, but only in an 'extended' sense of the term. Here, not only is the number distinction irrelevant, but the coreferring antecedent is hardly
identifiable in terms of any basic linguistic categories. Indeed, one can only describe the antecedent in this case as a 'higher-order entity', as Krenn does.

Just as the highlighting function of the $ta$ immediately following the coreferring nominal is triggered by the characteristics of conversation, the constant re-presentation of what has been talked about in the extended reference $ta$ is also triggered by the characteristics of conversation as a type of communicative mode. Given the instantaneous and irrecoverable nature of speech, it is not surprising that making continual references to what has been talked about is one way of securing continuity and coherence.

The reasons for the virtual absence from written discourse, especially essay writings, of the two types of $ta$ discussed here should now be obvious. First, writing and speaking have fundamental differences. Spoken words are irrecoverable once they are said while written words 'stay' for later review. Continual highlighting and reiteration are not required in writing. Second, even when there is a need to re-emphasize or recapitulate, there are many ways to do them in writing, either by punctuation or by rephrasing with appropriate linguistic devices. Given these long-established alternatives in the writing tradition, the third-person pronoun is not the best candidate in the competition.

Finally, why is $ta$ chosen for these two discourse functions, re-presenting and highlighting, in spoken discourse? In order to answer this question, we need to know the devices that are available for coreference. In Chinese, one can use a full NP (or even a clause), zero anaphora, the demonstrative $zhe$ 'this' (and sometimes $na$ 'that'), and the third-person $ta$. A full NP for these two discourse functions would not be economical. As a matter of fact, reducing the full NP (or clause) by replacing it with a shorter and therefore more convenient token in the spontaneous situation is the whole point (cf. Horn's Principle of Relevance (1984, 1989)). Zero anaphora is out of the question for the opposite reason. The two discourse functions aim for extra emphasis, which must be done through linguistic marking (cf. Horn's Principle of Quantity (1984, 1989)). Lastly, the demonstrative $zhe$ would have been the choice for the two functions if it had not also carried another important discourse function. The demonstratives, especially the proximal $zhe$, are fillers frequently used by speakers to fill the blanks between chunks of speech. Using $zhe$ could give rise to ambiguity: whether a particular occurrence
of *zhe* is anaphoric, as a straight indexical referring to some antecedent, or non-anaphoric, as a filler, would be undetermined within the immediate speech environment.

Thus, the two discourse functions of *ta* in spoken discourse probably owe their existence to the weak qualifications of the other three candidates above. *Ta* is indeed the ideal choice for a marker that must meet the demands for economy, saliency, and unambiguity. On the other hand, as discussed above, written discourse is disadvantageous to the development of these two functions, and it will probably be a long time before we find, on a regular basis, the extended reference *ta* and the *ta* immediately adjacent to the coreferring nominal in Chinese written discourse.

**NOTES.**

Thanks go to Joyce Liou and Phil Robyn for their assistance during my writing of this article.

I do not want to make an absolute claim that these things never occur in written discourse, simply because written discourse encompasses many types, including those that are deliberate imitations of spoken discourse, such as the dialogue script for a play.

Except for (1) in the text and (a), (b), and (c) in note 6, which are constructed examples, all other examples used in this paper are excerpted from my conversational data, and are marked with source symbols such as (XYZ). The conversational examples are simplified in the sense that all interactional mhm's that are not crucial to the point under discussion have been deleted. The conversational data used here come from two kinds of casual conversation. One set consists of two one-hour two-party conversations between a female and a male. The other set consists of two multi-party conversations, the length of each being 45 minutes. I was a participant in both multi-party conversations, although each time with a different group of friends. I want to thank Prof. Sandy Thompson for making the first set of tape recordings accessible for my use. I also want to express my appreciation for the interest and good humor of those who allowed me to tape record their speech. The following are some transcription and translation conventions used for the conversational examples:

- **lengthened syllable**
- **no time lapse between two speakers' speech**
- Mandarin key words discussed in the text and their English equivalents in the translation are both underlined
- ( ) The English in parentheses is my effort at
paraphrasing the Chinese speech for deriving a more colloquial English translation

[ ] The English in square brackets is my interpolation for a better understanding of the discourse segment in its original context
< > The English translation of the Chinese key word which does not make sense in the colloquial English translation of the whole segment

It is a well-known fact that Chinese referent tracking is primarily determined by inference. The inferred referent can be animate or inanimate, and the inanimate can further be a discrete entity or a non-discrete entity. Only the inanimate, non-discrete entity type corresponds to extended reference.

As discussed, the extended reference ta occurs most frequently with a copula or an existential verb. Unlike action verbs, both copula and existential are presentational as predicates. The subject of a presentational verb is passive in nature. A ta with a non-discrete entity as referent can be seen as a dummy, occupying the subject position simply for grammatical purposes. This is reminiscent of the ta used as a dummy object in Mandarin. As has been well-recorded in many grammar books, the third-person ta can be a dummy object in a number of places. First, ta is seen with the preposition guan 'with respect to, in regard to' in the following colloquial expressions:

(a) guan ta
    regard 3s
    Who cares?! 
(b) guan ta san qi er shi yi
    regard 3s three seven two ten one
    (lit.) Who cares that three times seven is twenty one! [Who cares?!]

Second, ta can be the optional indirect object when the direct object is a nominalized expression with a numeral or a measure word; (c) and (d) are examples.

(c) (from Chao 1968:320)
    Wo yao he     ta ge tongkuai.
    I want drink 3s M to-one's satisfaction
    I want to drink to a thorough satisfaction of it.
(d) (GYB) (On how ordinary people get rid of their frustrations)
1M. Wanshang shui ta yi da jiao, dier tian
evening sleep 3s one big sleep second day
2 zaoshang xiwang hao yidiar jiu shi le,
   morning hope good a-little then be PRT
M. (They'd) have a good night's sleep in the evening,
    and hopefully (they'd) feel better the next
morning, and that's about [all they can do].

Chao (1968) calls this type of ta a mock object, "actually referring to nothing specific except the total situation" (320).

Definitely colloquial, these expressions and constructions involving the dummy ta can nonetheless be seen in both written and spoken discourse. In traditional Chinese grammar, this kind of ta is characterized as having a xuâzhi 'empty reference' (Lu 1980). Indeed, a dummy object ta does not refer to any discrete entity, nor does it seem to designate an extended reference. However, as a dummy object for syntactic purposes, this use is a fully grammaticalized form. Actually, as it occurs only in a restricted number of places, the dummy object ta is a fossilized and marginal use.

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