Anaphora, Pragmatics and Style in German

Helga H. DeLisle

1. Introduction*

German uses two sets of anaphoric pronouns, the personal pronoun set (PP) *er, sie, es* and the demonstrative pronoun set (DP) *der, die, das*. The latter set has been largely neglected in the literature, possibly because it mainly occurs in informal conversations. In this paper, I will investigate how a basic concept like the deictic one is exploited for various functions, and to what extent these functions are integrated into the different styles of spoken and written German. It will be shown that the DP is used by the speaker to signal to the hearer not only referential but also affective information, and that DP usage is broadly determined by the degree of formality of a given text.

DPs are often counted among the core concepts or semantic primitives of human languages. Their functions include pointing, contrasting, focussing, and singling out. In their basic deictic interpretation, they are minimally accompanied by a gesture of pointing and are fully context bound. Over time, DPs take on a number of additional roles. In modern German, DPs not only function as articles and demonstrative adjectives but also as anaphoric and relative pronouns. This paper will only deal with the anaphoric usage of DPs.

Speakers generally use anaphoric pronouns to refer to a previously established referent. In German, both PPs and DPs fulfill this referential function. But the demonstrative set takes on a whole range of additional tasks, many of which center around its focussing and contrastive nature. The relationship between the two pronominal sets is reflected in their morphology. DPs are not a single morpheme but composed of a PP, which signals information on case, gender, and number, plus the deictic prefix *d-.* Similarly, the referential DP combines the information contained in the PP with the functions of the deictic prefix.

Only two earlier analyses deal explicitly with the DP as an anaphor. Oiwa (1979), who limits himself to a syntactic analysis of the occurrences of the DP, is forced to conclude that demonstrative pronouns often replace personal

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ones without any apparent reason. Ehlich (1982), on the other hand, discusses the different functions of the PP and the DP within a discourse frame. According to Ehlich, the PP is used by the speaker to indicate to the hearer that the same referent is maintained, while the use of the DP alerts the hearer to the fact that a switch to a new referent has occurred. This analysis, though correct in its general outline, does not account for many of the occurrences of the DP.1

2. Database

My analysis of the DP is based on an investigation of a large variety of texts. Since I was originally interested in the spoken language, I looked at 190 pages of transcribed telephone conversations (Brons-Albert 1984). On these 190 pages, I counted 552 DPs and 410 PPs used in their referential function. This distribution already suggests the importance of DPs as anaphors in certain types of discourse. Later on I looked at different varieties of spoken materials, transcribed in the three volumes of the Texte gesprochener deutscher Standardsprache, as well as a large variety of written materials (newspapers and journals). This research revealed that DP usage varies greatly depending on the type of discourse the participants are involved in.

3. Pragmatic functions

3.1 Contrastive functions

DPs are obligatory in combination with certain syntactic structures that highlight a topic the speaker wants to focus on. Such focussing is especially important when the speaker switches to a new topic and has to ensure that the hearer does not establish an incorrect referential link. As was pointed out by Givón (1989:225), the foremost pragmatic task of a pronoun is its unambiguous identification of the intended referent for the hearer; this is the ‘task-urgency principle’. The occurrence of the DP is often coupled with specific syntactic constructions such as left-dislocation as in (1) or existential constructions as in (2). In both instances, the following anaphor has to be the demonstrative. Personal pronouns are unacceptable in these contexts.2

(1) Du, meine Mutter, die hatte ’ne ganz phantastische.
   ‘You (know), my mother, she had a great idea.’

1 For a more detailed contrastive analysis of the functions of the PP and the DP see DeLisle (1993).
2 All examples are from Brons-Albert unless otherwise marked. Demonstrative pronouns and their English translation are italicized in the examples.
(2) da is also ’n Lehrer, *der* is wahnsinnig autoritär.
    ‘there is a teacher, *he* is extremely authoritarian.’

In these two utterances, the speakers signal a shift in topic through their syntactic choices, i.e., either a left-dislocated construction or an existential clause followed by an obligatory DP.

In some instances, however, it is the DP alone that signals that a switch in topic has taken place. Speakers will use the DP instead of the PP when they believe that the recipient may not be able to identify the referent of the pronoun unambiguously because they have changed the topic. This is especially true if the new topic is introduced in a non-subject position and if the preceding text contains several possible referential candidates, as in (3). The example is from the newspaper *Die Zeit*, November 1989, p.24.

(3) Schließlich die Schulung der künftigen Kleriker unter der Obhut der Kirche. *Die* erschrickt keineswegs über...
    ‘Finally the training of future clerics under the protection of the church.
    *It* (the church) is not at all frightened by....’

In this example, the hearer has three potential candidates for the referential link of the pronoun, namely *Schulung* ‘schooling’, *Obhut* ‘protection’, and *Kirche* ‘church’. All of them are, like the pronoun, feminine and singular. If the speaker had used the unmarked PP *sie*, he/she would have signalled topic continuity, indicating that the subject of the preceding clause, *Schulung*, was maintained as the topic. The use of the DP *die*, on the other hand, signals that the topic was switched to the closest available referent, namely *Kirche*. In German, such ambiguity can only arise in cases of categorical identity, i.e. identity in gender and number, among several referential candidates as in the above example.

In addition to signalling a switch or contrast in topic as in (1) to (3), DPs are used to signal a contrast in content. In these instances, a referent is implicitly or explicitly contrasted with a set of alternatives in the same general category. A DP used under these conditions receives additional stress as the constructed example below shows.

(4) A: Ist Hans schon gekommen?
    ‘Did Hans arrive?’

    B: Nein, *der* ist noch nicht hier.
    ‘No, *he* hasn’t arrived yet.’

The stressed use of *der* by B signals to A that even though Hans is not yet present, others are. This implied contrast becomes more emphatic with increased stress on the DP.
3.2 Affective deixis

The speaker also has the option to express affective attitudes towards the referent by superimposing intonational features on the DP. Thus in example (4), the speaker could use a low intonation on the DP coupled with heavy stress and length. The use of such suprasegmentals would indicate to the hearer that not only is Hans late but that he is expected to behave that way by the speaker and that the speaker disapproves. This example shows that the DP can, in contrast to the PP, transmit affective information to the hearer. This affective information falls under the general heading of distance to or disapproval of the referent.

Conversely, affective DP usage can also signal closeness and solidarity among the participants of a conversation. By distancing themselves from a third party referent, the participants establish a closer bond among themselves. One example of solidarity-building DP usage is what I have called the Powers-That-Be Usage. In this usage the pronouns, which are usually DPs but can be PPs, are frequently exophoric, i.e., they have no textual antecedent. Instead, the speaker expects the hearer to infer from context the intended referent. This referent is usually an organization or group of people with whom the speaker does not agree: school, the police, German drivers, etc. For example, (5) below is part of a conversation about adoption, but the adoption agency is only referred to with the DP die.

(5) Och das ist echt ne Sauerei daß die einem das so erschweren.
‘That really is bad that they make things so difficult.’

Since affective DP usage signals distance from or disapproval of the referent, it is understandable that parents, educators and even the DUDEN — that arbiter of standard German usage — often discourage the use of DPs as a referent for human beings. In contrast, DP usage is quite acceptable when talking about a generally despised insect like the bedbug. In the texts investigated, bedbugs are mentioned in three different contexts, twice in telephone conversations between relatives, and once in a humorous radio discussion. In all cases, the only pronoun used for them is the DP, as in (6):

(6) neinnein, die krabbeln nur, die sitzen ... hinter Tapeten ..., die marschieren durch die Gegend
‘nono, they only crawl, they sit ... behind wallpaper ..., they march around’

4. Stylistic distribution

Grammars of German, if they mention the pragmatics of anaphoric DPs at all, claim that they are a feature of the spoken, informal language. However, such a statement is too restrictive, as I have found DP usage in all styles of German,
both in oral and written discourse. What does vary is the type of DP usage acceptable in a given context. There is a clear continuum from the most informal style to the most formal one, with the former allowing the widest range of DP usage and the latter the narrowest. This continuum is represented schematically in the table below.

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<th>FORMALITY SCALE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FORMAL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affective Deixis, ex. 6</td>
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<td>Left Dislocation, ex. 1</td>
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<td>Powers-That-Be, ex. 5</td>
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<td>Existential, ex. 2</td>
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<td>Topic Switch, ex. 3</td>
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The table reflects how the degree of formality guides speakers in their use of DPs. DP usage in topic switch situations, as in example 3, is mandatory in all styles in order to establish the intended referential link, thus excluding ambiguity of reference. Contrastive focus without topic switch as well as existential clauses (examples 4 and 2) are not encountered in the most formal styles, e.g., essays or prepared lectures, but they are frequently found in public speech situations, e.g., radio discussions or more formal conversations. Left dislocations as in example 1, on the other hand, are emphatic constructions and are considered a feature of the informal, spoken language. But they too can be encountered, though less frequently, in public speech situations. This is also true for Powers-That-Be referents as in example 5. Though these DPs have some affective connotations, they are not directed towards individuals and are therefore acceptable in a wider range of styles. On the other hand, the derogatory affective usage of the DP, in which the participants in the conversation establish themselves in contrast to a third party referent, is typically found only in intimate, highly informal situations, especially if the referent is another human being. However, if the referent is a commonly despised insect like bedbugs, the derogatory DP can show up even in radio discussions, as example 6 shows.

5. Conclusion

The above analysis demonstrates that in terms of DP usage, there is no clear dichotomy between spoken and written varieties of German. Most written varieties, unless they imitate the informality of spoken language, are formal, and DP usage is restricted to switch topic cases. However, less formal varieties of the written language may contain different types of DP usage. For example, a report on a hospital stay in DIE ZEIT, a highbrow weekly newspaper, contained
several DPs in the contrastive focus and *Powers-That-Be* functions. Further, it appears that authors use the DP, whether consciously or unconsciously, to indicate the degree of formality of a text. For instance, reporters like to use the affective DP to signal informal indirect quotations in an otherwise formal text. Thus DP usage confirms what has been established in other contexts, namely that there is a continuum of styles, and that speakers as well as writers choose where to locate their speech acts along this continuum and select the accompanying structural features accordingly.

Helga H. DeLisle is Professor of German and Linguistics at New Mexico State University.

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