

## 3 Optimizing person reference – perspectives from usage on Rossel Island

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### 3.1 On the fundamentals of person reference

This chapter focuses on person-reference in a Pacific island society. Rossel island, roughly equidistant between Queensland, the New Guinea mainland, and the Solomons, is inhabited by a people who speak a language isolate called Yéli Dnye (classed ‘Papuan’, which here means simply ‘not Austronesian’). Ethnographic situations are natural experiments, which indicate the possibility of space for solutions to human problems. In this case, part of the interest is that Rossel Island is a closed universe of 4000 souls, linked by (mostly) known genealogical relations – in principle, any adult participant knows all other possible person referents. This closes off one whole parameter of person reference (the ‘non-recognitional’ of Sacks and Schegloff, this volume) without resorting to experimental control.<sup>1</sup> Another particular source of interest is that, as in many simple societies, the use of names is hedged around with restrictions and taboos. Together these constraints ensure that in many cases participants refer to persons inexplicitly, yet expect recipients to know exactly who they are talking about.

The approach I adopt here is to focus in on *repair* of third-person reference, concentrating especially on cases where recipients have to ask in effect ‘Who?’. The reasons for this focus will be carefully spelt out, but it will be useful to have the main points in advance. Repair is interesting because it tells us what the participants themselves find problematic. It also tells us, by virtue of the nature of the ‘redo’, what ancillary information might be expected to make an insufficient referring expression now do its work. Finally, the order in which upgrades of information are offered tells us, it will transpire, how speakers resolve competing principles that are always operative in this domain, but normally in a covert way.

<sup>1</sup> There are occasional references to persons not on the island, in which case non-recognitional reference may be at stake, but these are so rare that they have little bearing on the general point.

### 3.2 Some theoretical preliminaries

Sacks and Schegloff (1979, this volume) outline two principles or preferences operating in the person-reference domain. One preference specifies, if possible, the use of a recognitional, that is the use of a reference form that allows the recipient to recognize the referent. This is considered to simply be the specialization of the principle of recipient design in the domain of person-reference (recipient design has two subprinciples – (1) don't tell recipients what they already know, exploit it!, – and (2) if in doubt, oversuppose and undertell). The other major principle is the principle of minimization, in this domain taken to be the preference for a single referring expression, rather than two or more. Sacks and Schegloff propose that, when these are in conflict, it is minimization that is incrementally relaxed, until recognition of the reference is achieved. They illustrate this with examples of the following sort where an initial reference form ('Shorty') fails to achieve recognition, it is supplemented with another (intonationally 'try-marked' – 'Eddy?'), and then a third ('Woodward?'):

(1) (C is caller on a telephone call) from Sacks and Schegloff, this volume

C: Is Shorty there?  
 B: ooo jest - Who?  
 C: Eddy?  
     Woodward?  
     [  
 R:       oo jesta minnit

This idea that person reference is the locus where a number of optimization principles may compete is of considerable importance in what follows. The idea can be supplemented by noting that a number of further principles may be involved, in all perhaps the set in Example (2), here phrased as injunctions to the speaker:

(2) Multiple constraints on person reference<sup>2</sup>

- (1) Achieve recognition, in the strongest sense possible.<sup>3</sup> (RECOGNITION)
- (2) Minimize the expressive means (ECONOMY).

<sup>2</sup> This list came out of a general discussion across a number of languages but may nonetheless require particularizing for a given language.

<sup>3</sup> Recognizing an individual as a name and a face will count as 'stronger' than recognizing him as a node in a network of relations. Suppose I know there's a Dean of Humanities in the university, and I know that he's Jim Bluster. Referring to him as *the Dean* is to locate the office in a network of officials, and doesn't necessarily presume the speaker's familiarity with the incumbent, while calling him *Jim* does. If other principles (like (4)) don't intervene, this version of the preference for recognition will prefer *Jim*, providing the recipient can recognize him under that description. For this reason, Sacks and Schegloff formulated their preference for recognition as 'If possible, use a recognitional', where a first name is a prototype recognitional.

- (i) Use a single referring expression (Sacks and Schegloff's minimization).
  - (ii) Use a name rather than a description if possible (also a likely outcome of (1)).
  - (iii) Use only one name of a binomial if it will do.
- (3) Fit the expressive means to the recipient.  
(This principle may be exhausted by (1), but possibly not – consider, e.g., saying ‘mommy’ vs. ‘your mother’ vs. ‘Mary’ vs. ‘Mrs Williams’ when addressing a child. Consider too, cases of bilingualism, where *John* becomes *Juan* for a Spanish-speaking addressee (see Enfield, this volume)).<sup>4</sup>
- (4) Fit the expressive means to the topic or action being pursued (see Stivers, this volume).
- (5) Observe further local constraints (CIRCUMSPECTION) – for example, say ‘Mr Williams’ rather than ‘Jim’ if the school rules forbid pupils to use their teachers’ first names.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter will ignore principle (3) (if it actually exists) and (4) (which indubitably does). Instead it focuses squarely on how principles (1), (2) and (5) are reconciled, and that will already prove quite complex. For the sake of simplicity I have given these three principles the labels in bold above, and I now propose a slight recasting of their content:

### (3) Three principles

- (1) **RECOGNITION**: Restrict the set of referents so as to achieve recognition.
- (2) **ECONOMY**: Don't over-restrict the set of referents explicitly.
- (3) **CIRCUMSPECTION**: Show circumspection by not over-reducing the set of referents explicitly.

This recasting, which as in Sacks and Schegloff (this volume) phrases the principles as speaker maxims, makes explicit the *general means* whereby

<sup>4</sup> Relevant to Rossel island, and mentioned below, is that individuals have in addition to Rossel names, Christian names obtained on baptism (the island has been energetically missionized for fifty years). Christian names are used mostly when talking to foreigners, or in the context of church activities.

<sup>5</sup> Circumspection is thus a motivation to avoid the selection of the default referring expression (see introduction to this volume). Constraint (4), fitting the form to the action, is another motivation for avoidance of the default. Are, then, the two constraints the same thing? No, although they are related. Constraint (5), Circumspection, is a general principle that dictates a recurring avoidance of the default regardless of the substantive action being done in an utterance, although in another sense these uses signal ‘being circumspect’, just like a joke reference to junior as *the little emperor* might signal ‘being disapproving’.

recognition, economy and circumspection are to be achieved, namely by operating on the set of possible referents for a particular referring expression. For example, for recognition *John* may not do if there are too many familiar Johns, but there are unlikely to be many familiar *John Rickards*. But if *John* does indicate a unique John, on this occasion for this recipient, then Economy motivates *not* saying *John Rickard*.

Circumspection less obviously operates in the Western social world, but it will preoccupy us below on Rossel Island. Nevertheless, the principle is familiar enough: Suppose you spill wine on the carpet, and I go to the hostess and say: ‘We need a cloth – someone has spilled wine on the carpet’. Although it will no doubt become clear in due course who the culprit is, I’ve avoided saying it explicitly (to say ‘Tanya spilled wine on the carpet’ would be to play informer, and assign blame that perhaps belongs to the man who knocked her). Or, suppose I tell you, ‘I’m sorry, they have decided to retrench the workforce’, where you and I both know who *they* are, I seem to have avoided naming the parties to blame (or the person getting the sack!). In any case, however marginal in English, systematic avoidance of names or even of explicit reference by other means can be found in societies across the world, often discussed under the rubric of ‘taboo’ or ‘avoidance’. Thus, in traditional Australia ‘the social custom of name taboo, and the associated proscription on lexical words that have similar form, is of utmost significance for understanding one of the ways in which Australian vocabularies change’ (Dixon 1980: 28):

When a person dies both his name, and also any other form that is similar to it in sound, will be tabooed. This tabooing applies to lexical items ... and also to grammatical words; in 2.1 we mentioned the tabooing of the first person singular pronoun *ngayu* ‘I’ from dialects of the Western Desert language, on the death of a man named *Ngaynya*. (Dixon 1980: 98).

In these cases, indirect reference by hint is all, if anything, that is allowed. For example, by making some vague reference like ‘that man’ with a pointing gesture, effective pragmatic reference may be achieved, even though there may be quite a large set of possible adult male referents who live somewhere in the indicated direction. Circumspection, though, will have been served – the referring expression leaves it open to inference who is in fact denoted.

Now, given these three principles, I have found it useful to think about the interaction between them in the following way. We will stick strictly with the problem domain of the new introduction (first mention) of referents. Suppose we have an inventory of definite referring expressions, for example:

- (1) PRONOUNS: not normally involved in initial reference of course (since they only specify person, number, gender), they can be so used only if the

circumstances make just one particular referent supremely salient, as in Paul Bremmer's announcement of the capture of Saddam Hussein as 'We got him!'.<sup>6</sup>

- (2) MINIMAL DESCRIPTIONS: descriptions of the form *that man, the neighbour, that girl down the street*, where the semantics will leave a wide set of potential referents, but which in context may be sufficient.
- (3) KIN TERMS: *my uncle, John's grandfather, his child*, and the like are likely to have competitor potential referents (assuming that, e.g., most people have had a number of uncles, two grandfathers, and are likely to have more than one child). Still, they are clearly more restricted in referring potential than class 2.
- (4) NAMES: of course names, even of a binomial or trinomial variety, may not uniquely designate, still they are likely to be the most explicit means for reference available in a community.

If we consider just the *semantic* constraints that these expressions put on the pool of possible referents, such a list suggests a scale of decreasing ambiguity of reference: pronoun > minimal description > kin term > name (that is to say, there will be a much larger pool of candidates that satisfy the semantic conditions of *he* than those that satisfy the condition of being called *John Rickard*). In the same way, anyone has had two grandfathers, and many cousins, so *my cousin* fails to pick out an individual without a lot of ancillary information. Still, *that man down the road* – a minimal description – is even less restrictive. Yet the reader may well wonder: Why pick out these expression classes? One of the central goals of this chapter is to ground this empirically, not in the facts of English but in the practice of language use on Rossel island, and the English examples are merely meant to give the idea of some intuitive flesh. We'll see in due course that these are indeed the relevant classes for Rossel language use.<sup>6</sup>

Pending empirical demonstration, grant me the scale temporarily. This allows us to think about our three principles as operating on such a scale, as shown diagrammatically in Figure 3.1.

Here, the principle of Recognition will send the speaker towards the right of the scale, where possible referents are highly restricted. But the principle of Economy will work against this, sending him in the other direction, where there is a much larger pool of competing referents (i.e., referents compatible with the semantics of the expression). Circumspection works in the same direction, but for different reasons. The outcome, the choice of a referring expression, will be the balance between these forces, or if one prefers, the

<sup>6</sup> We'll also see that minimal descriptions, for example, turn out really to be that – there are scarcely any complex descriptions, involving, for example, relative clauses, or involving rich semantic specification.

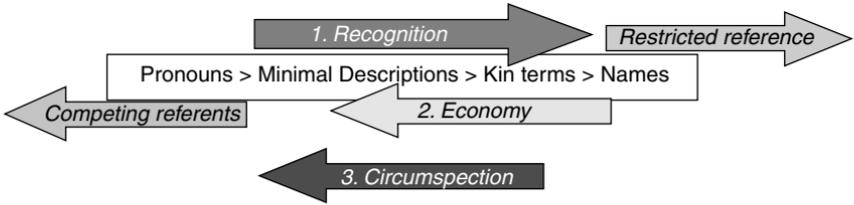


Figure 3.1 Competing principles as operations on a single scale.

optimization of the referring expression under competing principles. I'll say 'John' if that is enough for you to get the reference, 'John Rankin' if not. Alternatively, I might say 'That fella' pointing at the neighbour's house, or even 'He' if that is enough.

Before going further, note that this slight recasting of the Sacks and Schegloff (this volume) generalizations captures things that their account leaves vague. Returning to the earlier example, repeated in Example (4), the caller initially tries a nickname. Then, when this doesn't work, falls back on first name, later amplified with a last name. Sacks and Schegloff's notion of *Minimization* – use only one reference form – does not explain this sequence of amplification: The caller has used three such forms (or if one prefers, a first, followed by a second that contains an artful add-on when recognition of the first name is not immediate).<sup>7</sup> We need an account that explains the sequence – although the use of nicknames lies beyond the scope of this chapter, the use of single names backed up with a second where necessary is explained by the mechanism just sketched (but not by *Minimization*). Give enough semantic information to narrow the search domain enough to achieve recognition, but where you've judged wrong, escalate.

(4) (C is caller on a telephone call) from Sacks and Schegloff, this volume

C: Is Shorty there? <- Nickname  
 B: ooo jest- Who?  
 C: Eddy? <- First Name  
     Woodward? <- Last Name  
     [  
 R: ooo jesta minnit

A point, however, that the Sacks and Schegloff treatment does make amply clear is just how illuminating the structure of this kind of repair sequence is. Normally, first efforts at reference succeed, and then all of

<sup>7</sup> The sequence does not of course invalidate their generalizations (after all, it's their example). The point is that their principles do not explain why *Eddy* gets transformed on the fly into *Eddy Woodward* – obviously this might aid recognition, but how it works needs to be spelt out.

these competing principles are hidden from view: We simply get an optimized reference form served on a plate. Here, where things don't work the first time or even the second, our eyes are opened to the underlying sociophysics of the system. We see what kinds of things can be SOURCES OF TROUBLE, for example a nickname in the above example (terms in SMALLCAPS I will henceforth treat as technical terms). We see how a recipient can direct an initial speaker to his subjective source of trouble, here by using a specific NEXT TURN REPAIR INITIATOR (OR NTRI): By saying *Who?* rather than *Huh?*, for example, the recipient can indicate that he heard a name but found it insufficient for reference (while *Huh?* suggests he didn't hear adequately, and the initial speaker might simply repeat the prior utterance).<sup>8</sup> And most importantly, in the dynamics of upgrading as in Example (4) above, we see what was initially thought to be the best REPAIR (replacement with a first name), and then when that seems unsuccessful too, what the next best step in the escalation is thought to be. The example above generates a little scale of escalation from more to less familiar: Nickname > First Name > (First name plus) Last Name. This tells us something about how the participants locate people in their shared social worlds. More illuminating still are examples where we escalate into social descriptors, as in:

(5) Sacks and Schegloff 1979: 19

- A: ... well I was the only one other than the uhm tch Fords?, Uh Mrs  
Holmes Ford?  
You know uh the the cellist?  
[  
B: Oh yes. She's she's the cellist.

Above all, and this was the central point of the Sacks and Schegloff paper, notice how these examples show that Recognition takes priority over Economy (their Minimization), so that Economy is relaxed step by step until Recognition is achieved. Moreover, recipients actively pursue Recognition – they interrupt the progress of the talk to establish the identity of referents, if necessary. Thus, in addition to the list of principles in (3), and the diagram of opposing forces in

<sup>8</sup> It turns out for English this is an inadequate characterization, although it will prove fine for the corresponding items in Yéli Dnye. As often in language usage, a device can be exploited to suggest something else. *Huh?* does not always index a hearing problem but is sometimes used in English conversation to suggest that the prior turn was topically or otherwise inapposite relative to its sequential location (Drew 1997). Incidentally, the term NTRI is strictly speaking misleading, as Sidnell (this volume) points out, since incidental utterances may intrude between the trouble-source turn and the next one: one should rather talk about Next Position Repair Initiators, or NPRIs, where the notion of position captures the place in a canonical sequence. I stick with the established term however.

Figure 3.1, we need a statement of the relative priority of competing principles, as in the following (the place of Circumspection is yet to be established, but the English examples motivate the relative placement of Recognition and Economy):

(6) Ranked Principles:

Recognition > Circumspection > Economy

Because so much is revealed by repair in this domain, I will concentrate in what follows on repair sequences with just the kind of structure in (4).

These observations suggest the sort of thing a full theory of person reference would have to be.

What such a theory should be able to explain is the following:

- (1) The nature of person-referring expressions: It seems, as mentioned in the introduction, that personal names are universal (under a suitably catholic construal anyway). Persons share this property with places.<sup>9</sup> A theory should tell us why. Similarly, as far as we know, kin terms are universal.
- (2) The principles underlying person reference: A theory should specify the correct formulation of the underlying principles (like Recognition, Economy and their ilk) and where they come from.
- (3) The interaction between the principles: A theory should tell us how these principles interact, and how speakers optimize their choice of referring expression under these constraints.
- (4) The structure of repair sequences: A theory encompassing (1)–(3) should be able to explain why, when trouble arises in reference to persons, it is resolved the way it is.
- (5) Universals and cultural specializations: A theory should tell us which of these features in (1)–(4) should be preserved in all cultural transformations, and which are most likely to differ.
- (6) Origins: A theory of person reference should also tell us why the generalizations specified in (1)–(5) hold. For example, we would like to know where the constraints on this problem-space come from: Are they functional ‘best solutions’ to universal problems? Do they have deep roots in the brain specializations for person recognition in the visual and

<sup>9</sup> The only language reported to have no place names is Kata Kalok, a sign language used in a region of Bali (because this is a society of Absolute spatial thinkers, pointing will be sufficient – see Levinson 2003).

auditory modalities? Are they, as Sacks and Schegloff suggested, just specializations of more general conversational principles?

In the current state of our knowledge, this list sets the goal posts a long way off, but it is always good to know where we are heading. Meanwhile, the best we can do is try to flesh out the empirical basis for such a theory, by looking at the person – reference systems of different languages and cultures. In the conclusions to this chapter, I will return to these more general themes.

### 3.3 Rossel Island – the ethnographic background of person description

Rossel Island is the easternmost island in the Louisiade Archipelago, which stretches out from the tip of Papua New Guinea. It has, as mentioned, just 4000 inhabitants, who speak Yéli Dnye, a language isolate not known to be related to any other language. In both language and culture, Rossel Island is an outlier, separate from the Oceanic (Austronesian) languages and cultures of the archipelago and associated D'Entrecasteaux islands, famed for their Kula ring. The inhabitants of Rossel (I will call them Rossels) form one big family: In principle, everyone knows everyone else, at least of their own age or above. In a great many cases, adults will know the genealogical connections between any two people, as Rossels operate with mental genealogies that go back ten generations and cover 1000 or more individuals (Levinson, 2006 a). This leaves little scope for 'non-recognitional', that is for person references where participants judge that other participants will not be able to identify the individual in question – as mentioned above, part of the importance of this ethnographic 'natural experiment'.

We will see below that there are three main ways in which person identity can be overtly circumscribed (i.e., not left primarily to pragmatic bootstrapping): by the use of a name, by the use of a kin term, and by the use of a place name or a pointing gesture. All three of these involve *locating the individual in a network* – in a clan network, in a genealogical network or in a spatial network. For example, we can identify an individual by name, for example *Yidika*; by kinship connection to someone else, for example *Tâdpuwo u chènê* 'Tâdpuwo's nephew', or by place, for example *Wópuchêdê u mâawe*, 'The big man of Wópuchêdê'.

It will be important to understand the naming system, and most of this section is dedicated to it. An individual has a number of names. For example, the aforementioned Yidika (my assistant) has the names *Isidore*, *Yidika*, *Mbwâ* and *N:ââ*. *Isidore* is the Christian baptismal name gained through the Catholic mission – it plays little role in ordinary life. *Yidika* is the crucial, main name: It is the name given to him by his father. By the rules of the baptismal game, a

father gives his child one of a dozen names restricted to the clan of the father. Yidika's father belonged to the Tpyaa clan: He could choose between *Yidika*, *Tēpwa*, *Wet*, *Pikwa*, *Mboo* and so on (there's a separate list for female children). Now the crucial fact is that Rossel clans, of which there are twelve, are *matriclans* – that is, they are matrilineal descent groups. It follows that the sons of Tpyaa clan are not themselves Tpyaa members – they get their clan from their mother (see Figure 3.2). So when you hear someone's name, you know the clan of their father, not their own clan (the reason for the importance of the father's name is that Rossel Islanders also reckon patrilineally – in fact, land and magic and most inheritance goes patrilineally). The other names mentioned above, for example Yidika's names *Mbwā* and *N:āā*, come from his mother, and are scarcely ever used *except* when a taboo forbids the use of the main name, a matter explained below.

Returning to the main name, note that since the pool of names for each clan is restricted, there are bound to be a number of people with the same name (on average, say, a dozen other individuals with the same name – in fact, the demography of clans and the popularity of specific names mean that in some cases there may be thirty people or more sharing a name). Thus, in reference, names may need secondary specification by kinship or place. Note that, although on hearing a Rossel person's name, one knows his or her father's clan, names are just as devoid of meaning proper as English first names. It is simply that, by the rules of Rossel baptism, certain procedural constraints have to be followed. There is thus no reason here to depart from the Kripkean analysis of names as devoid of semantic conditions, but as rather having historical and causal links to a baptismal event (Kripke 1972).

Sharing a name on Rossel establishes a special relationship between the namesakes, who call each other *a penta* 'my namesake' rather than by name.<sup>10</sup> Namesakes are in certain respects identified as a single jural person. Thus, if you hit me (even if I am a wayward child), my namesake has the right to compensation. In fact, a namesake may retaliate in such cases by stealing the culprit's shell money and valuables with impunity. Thus, as in many traditional societies, namesakes are thought to have shared essence, in this case clearly reflecting shared kinship through their fathers. Further investigation will show that the less important names given by the mother often have a root in namesake relations. Thus Yidika's maternally given name *Mbwā* is partly named after sentiment for a distant uncle (MMMZSS),<sup>11</sup> but also because

<sup>10</sup> Armstrong (1928:55), the only ethnography of the island, mentions the importance of this relationship (he called it *binda*) but he misunderstood its basis and its attendant rights and duties.

<sup>11</sup> I use the kin-type notation: M=mother, F=father, B=brother, Z=sister, S=son, D=daughter, H=husband, W=wife. Concatenation indicates possession, so WF='wife's father', and so on.

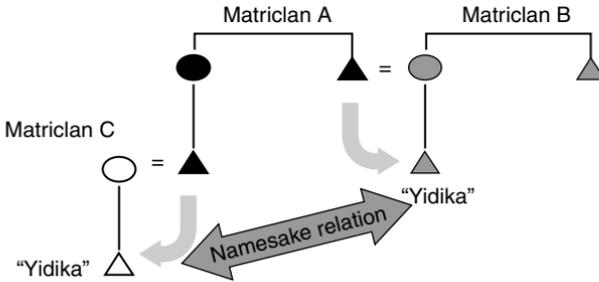


Figure 3.2 Name giving and matriclan membership.

Yidika's mother's namesake has a son of that name, while Yidika's other name *N:ââ* is the name of his mother's namesake's husband, father of *Mbwâ*.

Significantly, the only other beings on Rossel that share the same naming system are pigs (gods have non-human names). Pigs are honorary humans.<sup>12</sup> The owner of a pig may give a pig one of his matriclan names (i.e., as if he were the father of it), or alternatively he may name it after one of his clan totems. On the slaughter of the pig, any human namesakes of the pig may claim compensation (usually delivered in shell money), on the basis just mentioned of jural partial identity (see also Armstrong 1928: 89). This is yet another indication of the humanoid nature of pigs – pigs are fed cooked human-style food, and when they are slaughtered it is with the full ceremony that accompanied the eating of cannibal victims.

Now, as in many societies, the use of names is hedged around with restrictions. Notice, for example, that in our own society, for senior close kin relations kin terms take precedence over names, hence *Mom*, *Dad*, *Grandpa*, *Uncle*, *Auntie*, and the like, and some officers (like judges) are properly addressed and referred to by their title not their name.<sup>13</sup> Similar rules obtain on Rossel. But in addition, there are taboos of varying strictness on the use of names. The strictest taboo holds between in-laws, usually brothers and sisters-in-law, or between parents-in-law and their children-in-law, who have specifically entered into an agreement to treat each other as taboo (the *choko* relation). Such an agreement may tacitly arise, or may be overtly arranged. In this case the parties contract never to utter, as long as they live, any word with the same phonetic content as the other's name – the name may not pass their lips, even if it were to refer to someone else. In

<sup>12</sup> In many societies, this would be unthinkable: 'Names are then what distinguish humans from animals' (Maybury-Lewis 1984 on the tribes of central Brazil).

<sup>13</sup> The use of kin terms vs. names in English dialects is actually a locus of current sociolinguistic change, in both address and reference, so generalizations are hazardous.

addition people in such a relation use, or traditionally used, an alternate vocabulary for the body parts and personal possessions of the tabooed individuals (see Levinson, 2006c). Less strictly, any in-laws should avoid direct reference to each other. Thus, I might refer to my wife's sister, who is married to Weta, as 'the people of Weta's village', where the plural denotes a large set, as required by the principle of Circumspection described in Section 3.2. (The principle of Circumspection lies behind all the honorific plurals of the world – see Brown and Levinson 1987.) As in many kin term systems (but not in English except, e.g., for *cousin*), the Rossel kin-term system is classificatory – that is, I will have many 'sisters' who are actually maternal cousins. Nevertheless, their husbands are my in-laws. So for some classificatory sister Ani, I will refer to her husband, not by name, but as 'some man of Ani's'.

In addition to avoiding the names of affines, one avoids naming the recently dead – every death is attributed to sorcery, and one alludes rather than overtly refers to the death event with its associated accusations and counter-sorcery. One might say 'that woman, that thing that happened', pointing in the right direction (see Levinson 2005). Finally, one avoids the names of senior kinsmen where a kin-title may be more appropriate, and in addition the names of co-present parties, especially seniors. All of these constraints, summarized in (7), are commonly found in kin-based societies – that is to say the majority of cultures in the world.

(7) Summary of taboos on naming

- (1) Strict taboo on designated in-laws (*choko relation*)
- (2) Taboo on direct reference to other in-laws
- (3) Avoidance of direct reference to the recently dead
- (4) Preferential use of kin terms for reference to senior kin
- (5) Preferential avoidance of the names of co-present parties

I have dwelt on the naming system. As we have seen, names invoke the matriclan system, and thus indirectly the genealogical relations between people. Reference by kin term is also common. Kin terms are, of course, relational, and one reckons from some propositus X, as in 'X's grandson'. X can be the speaker, addressee or most often a named person. Where X is a third party, as in 'Yidika's son', the propositus is always a senior kinsman (thus one doesn't normally refer to 'Ghalyu's father'). For a full description of the kin-term system, which is roughly a Crow III kin-term system with a superimposed alternation of generations, see Levinson (2006a). Finally, I mentioned that use is made of place reference, typically to disambiguate reference by other means. The places named may be districts, but typically they are the home-base villages or hamlets of the persons referred to. Men stay

in their native hamlets, but women typically marry out, and it is then to their marital locations that reference is made. Reference to place (at least when in conjunction with person reference) is far more often by pointing, which is accurately tracked, than by use of place names.

### 3.4 The natural history of initial reference to persons

If we look at conversations on Rossel Island, we find that nearly all initial referring expressions to persons are of just four classes: names, kin terms, minimal descriptions and ‘zeros’. Names and kin terms have the structure just described. Minimal descriptions involve a deictic and a nominal, of the kind ‘that man’, ‘that girl’, and the like. Now there is more information in Rossel deictics than is captured in such glosses. Consider the following simplified example:

(8) R03\_v6 8:09 (see Example (20) for full sequence)

- N: **wu dmââdi** a kèdê Thursday ngê anê lóó  
That girl told me she would go across on Thursday
- P: *n:uu ngê?*  
Who did?
- N: °(**yi dmââdi**) °  
That girl
- P: *Mby:aa tp:oo móóó ngê=*  
The daughter of Mby:aa did?
- ((2 turns omitted))
- N: (**ki dmââdi**)  
(That girl)

Here the girl (*dmââdi*) is introduced with a deictic *wu* meaning ‘the one that is non-visible or indirectly ascertained’, then re-referred to by a deictic *yi* specialized for anaphoric use (‘the one just mentioned’), and finally re-introduced with an unmarked deictic *ki* (which by not being anaphoric suggests a ‘redo’ as if the problem was a hearing problem). Moreover, such references are frequently accompanied by pointing (more in a moment). Thus, minimal descriptions of this sort carry more information than their short forms suggest.

Finally, new referents are also often introduced subliminally as it were, with a zero (i.e., without any denoting noun phrase), and only a verb agreement or some other indirect encoding (e.g., in quotation particles, which are unanalysable elements meaning things of the kind ‘he said to me the day before yesterday’). The usage is perhaps not dissimilar to saying in English ‘They tell me it’s your birthday’, where the reference of *they* is either obvious, or not germane, or both.

These four types of referring expression, as summarized in (9), make up the great bulk of referring expressions to persons in Rossel conversation. They are often supplemented by pointing, about which more below.

- (9) The four major types of referring expression in Rossel conversation
- (1) NAMES, for example *Yidika*
  - (2) KIN TERMS (i.e., a specified relation between a propositus and a referent), for example *móó* ‘Your brother’, *Yidika tp:oo* ‘Yidika’s son’ (in this case the propositus is always senior to the referent)
  - (3) MINIMAL DESCRIPTIONS, for example *kî mââwê* ‘that bigman’
  - (4) ZEROS or inflected predicates, e.g. the quotative particle *yipu* ‘He said to them (three or more) the day before yesterday’

Only 2 per cent of initial references in the sample described below have some other form. One of these exceptional types is non-recognitional reference to persons, always to persons not on Rossel Island (of the kind ‘the white man I was working for’). Others involve a combination of the above types, as in forms glossing ‘that man Yidika’. Thus there is a real paucity of complex descriptions.

What lies behind the choice between one of the four main types? They differ in the conceptual route to the referent. Names give a direct route, kin terms go via the propositus, minimal descriptions attend to the sex, status and deictic properties (present, absent, far away, etc.) of the referent, while zeros rely on pragmatic inference (using the descriptive content of associated predicates). Secondly, they provide increasing pools of possible referents as far as the semantic conditions go: A name denotes one of a small set of people who bear that name, but a kin term usually denotes a larger set. For example, there may be ten Yidika’s on the island, but *Yidika tp:oo* ‘Yidika’s son’ is likely to be in forty ways ambiguous (on the ethnographically reasonable assumption that on average each Yidika has four sons). But a minimal description like ‘that girl’ is going to have hundreds of possible exemplars, while zeros fail to specify even age and gender, so could refer to anyone on the island. Any of these forms may be associated with a pointing gesture, which can serve to narrow the search domain.

Let us now turn to some descriptive statistics about the deployment of these four types. Table 3.1 shows the distribution of initial reference forms over the four types in a forty-minute sample of conversation with a hundred newly introduced references to persons.

The four classes, as listed in (9), account for 98 per cent of all initial references. Note too that names are not much more frequent than any other

Table 3.1 *Frequency of four types of initial referring expression*

<i>N</i> = 100	Examples (in gloss)	Subtotals (in %)	
Names	'Yidika'	28	
Kinship descriptions	'Yidika's son' 'Your grandson'	26	
Minimal Descriptions	'That girl'	25	} 44
Zeros	'_ says'	19	
Total		98 (2 other)	

Table 3.2 *The role of names*

<i>N</i> = 100	Subtotals (in %)	Deictic/anaphoric element (in %)	Involve names (in %)
Names	28	0	28
Kinship descriptions (propositus = name or deictic/anaphoric)	26	16	10 ( <i>c.</i> 40% of kinship descriptions use names as propositus)
Totals			38 (38% of all new references involve a name)

type – the distribution across the four types is roughly equal, except that Zero forms are slightly less (at 19 per cent still a large proportion for a form that one thinks of as quintessentially 'locally subsequent' in design, that is designed for non-initial reference, q.v. Schegloff 1996a). Perhaps most surprising is that the Minimal Descriptions and Zeros together make up nearly half the initial reference forms – these are forms that are necessarily vague (or better, designedly underspecified) as far as semantic constraints on reference go.

Although names constitute only a bit over one quarter of usages, they also play a role inside kin-term specifications (as in *Yidika tp:oo* 'Yidika's son'). Although some kin terms have a deictic or anaphoric propositus (as in 'your nephew' or 'his nephew'), 40 per cent have a name as propositus. Table 3.2 shows that once these uses are taken into account, names play a role in over a third of all initial person references.

These four types of referring expression account for nearly all person-referring acts in the vocal–auditory channel. However, they do not exhaust the inventory, because referring acts in the visual–gestural channel, to which we now turn, also play an important role in the natural history of reference.

Table 3.3 *Distribution of pointing over the types of initial reference*

<i>N</i> = 100	Alone (in %)	<b>With pointing</b> (in %)	With other linguistic elements (in %)	Subtotals (in %)	
<b>Names</b> ‘Yidika’	12	11	5	28	
<b>Kinship</b>	18	8	0	26	
<b>Triangulations</b>					
‘Yidika’s son’					
‘His/your grandson’					
<b>Minimal descriptions</b>	8	16	1	25	} Pointing occurs with 60% of these ‘vague’ references
‘That girl’					
<b>Zeros</b> ‘_ says’	8	11	0	19	
<b>Total</b>		<b>46</b>		98 (2 other)	

### 3.5 The nature of pointing gestures accompanying person reference

Rossel Island is only 40 km long by 25 km wide, although it is rugged terrain with a central volcanic spine nearly a kilometre high, clothed in dense rain forest. Rossels not surprisingly then know where any place lies from any other. They have what I have called an ‘absolute’ spatial reference system, which downplays ‘relative’ left/right distinctions in favour of absolute geocentric coordinates like west/east. Along with this goes a cognitive specialization, a ‘mental compass’ (Levinson 2003). This makes it both natural to produce and fast to comprehend fleeting pointing gestures, which have systematically different properties than those found in ‘relative’ systems (Haviland 1993; Levinson 2003: 247–71).

Pointing plays an important role in initial references, both qualitatively (pointing alone without any words may suffice), and quantitatively, because the frequency of pointing is actually very high as shown in Table 3.3: nearly half of all initial person references occur with pointing. Pointing is especially likely with person references of the Minimal description or Zero types (it occurs with 60% of them – see Table 3.3) – that is, with those references with least semantic content, or to put it another way, where the identity of the referent is indicated almost entirely by gesture.

The semantics of pointing gestures needs some explanation. Firstly, as already noted, pointing gestures have directional veracity, because they are of the ‘absolute’ variety – they indicate the actual direction intended. Secondly, pointings accompanying person references are not generally in the direction of the actual persons (unless they are co-present); they are rather in most cases in

the direction of the referent's home base – that is, his or her hamlet of residence (Rossels live in small hamlets of patrilineal kin – essentially a man and his sons, with associated wives and children). The sequence illustrated in Figure 3.3 makes this special semantics clear. In the frame shown in still 1, the speaker points to the right (west) showing *where* the woman in question has been sent (and thus indirectly indicates where she now is). In still 2, the interlocutor to the left checks his understanding of *whom* the woman is – he points over his shoulder to the left (east), to her village of residence, while at the same time asking ‘Taapwé’s daughter?’. The two speakers are pointing in opposite directions, even though referring to the same person – no misunderstanding arises, because questions of person identification are always settled by pointing to home base.

As is true in many societies, pointing is done not only with the hand. It may also be done with the head. Figure 3.4 shows a way of pointing straight ahead by thrusting out the neck, raising the chin and gazing in the requisite direction. The speaker says (what glosses as) ‘Mby:aa is ill’, and the head point serves to indicate which Mby:aa. When the referent's home base lies to one side of the speaker's body, a head twist and a quick glance in the requisite direction will suffice, as illustrated in the sequence in Figure 3.5. Figure 3.5 shows a man saying in effect ‘Yesterday (the/an) old woman went across to Kpaap:aa’, naming a district over the mountain where she is married – the directional information serves both to indicate the direction of travel and the identity of the woman (who is introduced with a noun phrase unmarked for (in)definiteness). Such pointing gestures on person references are quick and frequent – Figure 3.6 shows two index finger pointings separated by only 500 ms.

In what follows, the reader should bear in mind that nearly half of all new person references are accompanied by such pointing gestures, and in the case of semantically unspecific references (minimal descriptions and zeros) such gestures occur with nearly two-thirds. Gestures thus form an essential part of the picture.

### 3.6 Repair in third position

We turn now to examine repair of initial person references. Repairs can be found in various structural loci, including self-repair within a turn or in the transition space between turns as in (10):

(10) Self-repair in transition space (R03\_v19\_ss2 00:02:20)

M: *ki D:ââkiy:a u lama ka pyede = aa Nteniyé u lama*  
 That D 3Poss knowledge is sitting er N 3Poss knowledge  
 That D:ââkiy:a knows all about it=er Nteniyé knows it



Figure 3.3 The distinction between home base and current location.



Figure 3.4 (continued overleaf)



Figure 3.4 Pointing ahead with neck, eyes and chin.

Or after a gap, and prompted by a visual signal, and just in time to pre-empt other-correction as in (11):

**(11)** Self-initiation of self-repair after delay in other-repair (R03\_v12\_sl 00:06:36)

- R: *mu* *Lêmonkê* *kêle*  
 This.nonvisible Lêmonkê (standing behind speaker) wasn't there then
- P: (P looks around to check)
- R: *ee!* (gestures 'not')
- eh-  
 (1.0)  
*Yamî 'n:aa*  
 (I mean) *Yamî 'n:aa*
- [
- P: *Yamî 'n:aa* <- Note P has delayed correction<sup>14</sup>

But here we will concentrate on self-repairs in third turn, after a next-turn-repair-initiator (NTRI) like 'Who?' or 'Which person?' – that is, on sequences like Example (1) with which we began. Recollect that it is these sequences that may be able to tell us something about conflicting principles behind sequential upgrades of person reference. Even in this quite restricted domain, the possibility space is enormous, as laid out in (12).

<sup>14</sup> Note that P has looked around to find that the man referred to as Lêmonkê is in fact Yamîn:aa, but he has delayed correcting R for over 2 seconds – the timing suggests that by the time R has found the intended name, P had already launched his own correction.

Still 1



Still 2



Still 3



Figure 3.5 (continued overleaf)

Still 4  
(d)



Figure 3.5 Pointing to one side with head tilt and eyes.

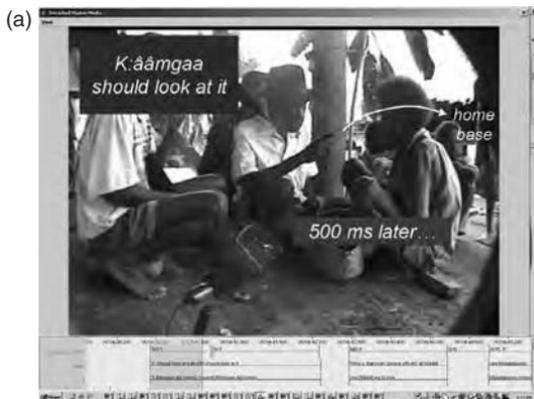
(12)

Types of trouble source	-> NTRI type	-> Types of repair
(1) Names	(1) person-restricted ('who?')	(1) repetitions
(2) Kin terms	(2) unrestricted ('Huh?')	(2) expansions
(3) Minimal Descriptions		(3) replacements

We could examine repairs following specific kinds of trouble sources (e.g., names vs. minimal descriptions), we could examine the different roles that different NTRIs ('Who' vs. 'Eh?' vs. 'Which man?', and so forth) seem to have in determining the sequence type and we could classify the different types of repair that ensue (e.g., repetitions designed for a hearing problem, expansions for an indeterminacy problem, replacements for an understanding problem). To do this properly one would need a much larger data base than I currently have at my disposal – I have found about fifty candidate third-turn repair sequences in a six-hour corpus of conversation. For various reasons, not all of these are usable – they may be inaudible in parts, the repair though initiated may never have been done, there may be doubt over whether the 'Who?' or 'Huh?' is actually an NTRI, or whether the person reference is actually initial. Leaving these dubious exemplars aside, we have twenty nine clear cases, and it is the patterns in these cases that this section is about.

It is clear from the data that general or unrestricted NTRIs, of the 'Huh?' kind, are understood as indicating hearing problems, since they invariably get exact repetitions of the trouble source, as in Examples (13) or (19). (Incidentally, in British English, general NTRIs do not always engender repetitions, sometimes being understood as, for example, failure to see the

Still 1



Still 2



Figure 3.6 Rapid succession of pointing gestures on two person references.

relevance of the trouble-turn, or expressing astonishment at it (Drew 1997; Selting 1996).)

(13) R03\_v27\_s3 00:19:19

T: *ye ngê Chiipyââ ghee knî december ngê a koko té*  
 (my D) Chiipyââ and kids will come up in December

M: *:êê?* <- general NTRI  
 What?

T: *Chiipyââ ghee knî december ngê a koko té*  
 Chiipyââ and kids will come up in December

Table 3.4 *Distribution of repair types after each type of person introduction*

Trouble source ( <i>N</i> =29)	Repair			
	Name	Kin terms	Place	Description
Name	1	1	1	
Kin terms	5	2	1	
Minimal description	1	7		2
Zero	5	1		2

We will therefore focus exclusively on NTRIs that are person-reference-specific – that is, of the type ‘Who?’ (*N:uu?*), ‘Which person’ (*Ló pini?*), ‘Which John?’ (*Ló Kaawa?*) and the like. Altogether we have twenty-nine instances to generalize across. The focus of interest is precisely how a person reference is repaired, that is how when such a reference proves inadequate it is upgraded. Table 3.4 shows the distribution of upgrades after initial person references of each of our four main types (names, kin terms, minimal descriptions and zeros). Each row indicates the type of reference form that occasioned the trouble, with the type of reference forms used to repair the failed reference.

The numbers are not large, but three patterns are well attested:

- (1) When repair is requested after a kin term introduction, a name is normally produced (in five cases; in two other cases an alternative kin reckoning occurs).
- (2) When a minimal description (like ‘that girl’) is produced, and repair requested, the most likely repair is a kin term (seven cases).
- (3) When a zero is queried, a name is normally produced (five cases).

Notice, incidentally, that Names are the initial reference form least likely to need repair, which suggests that other things being equal they make the best reference forms.

There is a better representation of the patterns in Table 3.4 given by the diagram in Figure 3.7, which shows clearly the directional nature of the upgrades.<sup>15</sup> In this figure, each arrow indicates one attested case and the direction of the upgrade, and the arrows link ellipses representing the four major types of person reference, together with two ways of indicating ancillary spatial information about the home base of the referent: pointing, and the use of a place name. Note that pointing and place names may occur alone, as upgrade turns.

Looking at Figure 3.7, it is evident that the most travelled route in this map of possible upgrade types is from Minimal Descriptions to Kin terms (and the next

<sup>15</sup> My thanks to Nick Enfield for first suggesting this kind of representation to me.

most travelled from Kin terms to Names). Example (14) shows such a case in multi-party conversation, where there is considerable overlap between turns. Andrew introduces the referent with ‘This fellow’ (bold), and Raymond asks ‘Which person?’ – and is answered by Ntómuwó with a kin expression ‘son of Kee’.

(14) From Minimal Description to Kin term (R03\_v29\_s2 00:29:01)

- Andrew: **mu pini** yi doo kmaapî  
**This fellow** was eating people  
 [
- Elami: nyââ  
 Yes  
 (0.8)
- Elami: yi pi dînè mbwó  
 that heap of human bones  
 [
- Ntómuwó: Kee tp:oo yi doo, Kee tp:oo yi doo  
 The son of Kee was doing it, the son of Kee was doing it
- Raymond: **ló pini** yi doo kmaapî, Dâpukada Dyewâ  
 Which person was eating them, Dâpukada, or Dyewâ?  
 [
- Ntómuwó: **Kee tp:oo**, kee tp:oo, Kee tp:oo Wudichedê  
 Son of Kee, son of kee at Wudichêdê  
 [
- Elami: ó k:ââ ngee kwo, k:ââ km:ee kî nté a  
 kwo,  
 The bones are just there, near that  
 post
- Raymond: **Kee tp:oo**  
**(Ah) the son of Kee**

Example (15) shows a case of another kind, an upgrade from minimal description to name, in this case within a kin-term specification – that is, the propositus of the kin relationship was unclear. M’s ‘that guy’s son’ gets repaired with ‘N:aaakê’s son’. A third person, Mgaa, then demonstrates recognition of the referent by naming him directly (‘Tootoo’).

(15) From Minimal Description to Name (R03\_v19\_s2 00:29:35)

- M: mu pini tp:oo mu doo a naa. <- new referent  
 that guy’s son was paying his brideprice
- T: e, ló pini tp:oo  
 eh, whose son?
- M: ‘N:aaakê tp:oo <- min. desc. replaced  
 ‘Naakê (Moses) son by name of propositus
- T: ââ!
- Mgaa: :êê, :êê! Tootoo <- name of referent to  
 oh Tootoo demonstrate recognition
- M: Tootoo.

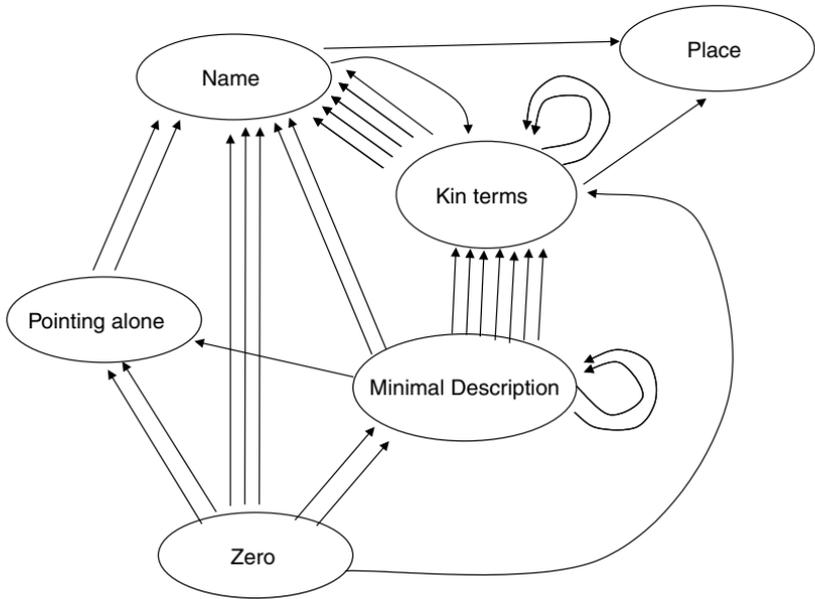


Figure 3.7 The major repair routes – the direction of upgrades.

Let me summarize so far. To signal a recognition problem, recipients use a person-specific NTRI like ‘Who?’ or ‘Which person?’.<sup>16</sup> Especially common repairs were from Minimal Descriptions to Kin terms ( $n = 7$ ), and from Kin terms to Names ( $n = 5$ ). There were only two cases of Minimal Descriptions being upgraded straight to Names, and in the reverse directions only one case of Name being upgraded with a Kin term (see Figure 3.7.). This suggests a scale of upgrading, and thus a scale of informational richness, as in (16):

**(16)**

Minimal Description > Kin term > Name

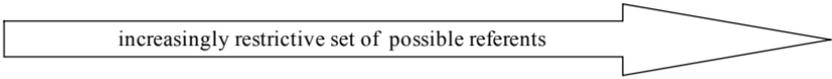
Further evidence for this scale comes from multiple upgrades, to which we will turn shortly. If we put (16) together with the observations at the outset (see Figure 3.1), we might outline the following more general scale, where each of

<sup>16</sup> I have one example of a ‘Who?’ which in the end turned out to be a hearing problem (R03\_v27\_s3, 00:22:53), but the speaker of the trouble source interpreted it as a signal of a recognition problem.

our four types of expression can be augmented by a pointing gesture, giving us an eight-point scale:

(17)<sup>17</sup>

Zero (+ Point) > Min. Description (+ Point) > Kin Term (+ Point) > Name (+ Point)



The rationale for the scale is that each step up the scale adds further restrictive semantic conditions on the referent. A zero form is likely to indicate number and grammatical role through verb agreement; a pointing gesture will add directional constraints. A minimal description will add gender and age specifications, and a pointing gesture will again further constrain the set of possible referents. And so on.

If we entertain this scale for a moment, we will appreciate a number of fundamental theoretical points:

- (1) Viewed as heading towards *Zero*, this scale is *not* a scale of formal or phonetic minimality – such a scale would have *Zero* > *Name* > *Minimal Description* > *Kin* relations.
- (2) Such a scale is also *not a scale of semantic minimality* (pace Levinson 1987). A scale of semantic minimization would have *Zeros* and *Names* as neighbours – neither place inherent semantic conditions on the referent (except for grammatical constraints and constraints due to the rules of baptism).
- (3) Rather, such a scale is a scale of diminishing *referential competition*.

It is clear that if you want a sure-fire recognitional form, you should use a name. So why are only a quarter of all new referents on Rossel introduced by a name? The answer of course is that sometimes there are reasons not to use the sure-fire solution. One major reason lies in the art of indirection – the strategic avoidance of nailing down a referent, for reasons of taboo, politics, politeness, gossip and the art of innuendo, as specified in our principle of *Circumspection*.

### 3.7 Circumspection motivates multiple, sequential upgrades

If Recognition was the only principle operative in this domain, as soon as a recipient indicates trouble of a recognitional kind, a speaker should provide a

<sup>17</sup> This scale may be overly strong as it may be possible that the points add sufficient specificity to allow them to ‘leap frog’ up the scale. Only further work will allow us to sort this out.

sure-fire recognitional, namely a name. (Arguably, the speaker should have used a name in the first place, so obviating the trouble – but as we have seen on Rossel only a quarter of initial references are by name.) In fact, there are many cases where a speaker starts low down on the scale, with a Zero or Minimal Description, and then slowly creeps up the scale step by step. This can only be understood in terms of a contrary principle, like my Circumspection, which specifies ‘Don’t be more specific than is necessary to achieve reference’. Let us look at some cases.

In the sequence in Example (18), K reveals his plan to recover the bride price due to him from a step-daughter: He explains to T that he has persuaded a village magistrate to get a bigman, whose Christian name is Cosmis, to stand up and speak on his behalf at the end of the ongoing ceremony for a new house. However, he introduces Cosmis with a Zero (a third-person future punctual aspect inflection, bold below), with a simultaneous pointing gesture to Cosmis’ home base. This proves problematic, and after the best part of a second’s silence, in which T mouths a silent syllable, K produces a repeat of the pointing gesture to Cosmis’ house without saying anything. Finally, T asks ‘Which person?’ and K produces the name (K:ââmgaa, Cosmis’ real name), but sotto voce.

(18) Upgrade from Zero to Point, and then to Name (R03\_v19\_s2 00:14:52)

- K: *wod:oo law nkwodo ka tóó.*  
 Then law on.top is sitting  
 ‘It’s already before the law’
- T: *éé*  
 ‘ah’
- K- *ma akapê a kada chi kwo,*  
 yesterday he.said.to.me my front 2sIMP stand  
 ‘Yesterday he said to me, ‘You go ahead of me  
*ala dpodo chêdê ngê a pyodopyodo <yed:oo a kââ.><- <points East>*  
 this work finish ADV is becoming then 3FUT summon/call  
 after this work is finished then **(zero) will get up and speak**  
 (0.8)
- T: ((mouths silent syllable!))
- K: ((points E)) <- points East silently
- T- *ló pini?* <- NTRI  
 ‘which person?’  
 (0.5) <- intense mutual gaze in silence
- K- *°K:ââmgaa°.* <- Name (sotto voce)  
 Cosmis
- T- *°K:ââmgaa°.*  
 ‘Cosmis!’
- K- *:êê*
- T- *:êê*
- K- ((eyebrow flash))

The interest of the example lies in the fact that K clearly resists immediate upgrade to the name – he waits for recognition, and then repeats silently the gesture to home base (Figure 3.8, still 5), and even when asked, gazes in silence at T for half a second. When he finally answers, he does so very softly. The resistance may have a number of sources: K is implying that T should be able to figure out the reference, and he certainly doesn't want to broadcast his plan to the present gathering. Figure (3.17) gives an impression of the visual cues involved.

In another example from the same conversation, a zero (or implicit person, the payer) is introduced with a gerund ('its repaying'). When questioned, the speaker produces a minimal description with a kin term (referring to two individuals linked by kinship), and after a *three-second* pause, filled by mutual gaze, upgrades to a single name. The recipient asks 'Who?' and gets the other name:

**(19)** Upgrade from Zero to Minimal Description/Kin term, and then to Name (R03\_v19\_s2 00:13:38)

- K- *awède nga anî tóó, u pyinè d:a ngmêê, ngmepe,*  
'I am here today, I'm looking for its repaying. <-Zero  
*law nkwoó até ní kmungo.*  
'I took it up to the law' (eye-points)
- T- *n:uu ye ngmepe?* <- person-specific NTRI  
'Who is paying back (to you)?'
- K- *:aa?* <- general NTRI
- T- *n:uu ye ngmepe?* <- repetition of person-specific NTRI  
'Who is paying back (to you)?'
- K- *kî pini dy:eemi knî* <- Minimal Description + Kin term  
'that man with his brothers in law'  
(3.0 seconds) <- prolonged mutual gaze  
*Kopwo* <- Name 1  
(2.0 seconds) <- prolonged mutual gaze
- T- *n:uu?*  
'who (else)?'
- K- *Wuyópu* <- Name 2
- T- (nods)
- K- *tapî, dipî kede wo*  
a Tapi coin

The point is that the upgrade is stepwise up the scale shown in (17), from zero to minimal description and kin term, and finally to two names. It has to be extracted against obvious reluctance. (Notice, incidentally, that as remarked above, a general NTRI gets an exact repetition, while a person-specific one gets an upgrade).



Figure 3.8 (continued overleaf)



Figure 3.8 Upgrade from Zero > Point > Name.

These two examples show us stepwise escalation to names, whereupon recognition is achieved. Let us now turn to a different kind of case, where the speaker appears to completely resist using the name. In Example (20), N introduces a referent with a minimal description, ‘that girl’, using the demonstrative *wu* ‘that.unseen/indirectly.ascertained’ (see discussion of this as Example (8)). After a silence in line 2 (which may invite self-repair), one of the recipients P asks ‘Who?’. N repeats ‘that girl’ sotto voce, withholding further verbal specification – note that now there is an anaphoric demonstrative, glossing ‘the girl I just mentioned’. The recipients now offer a series of four guesses (or three plus one repeat), all phrased in terms of kinship specifications, not as names. The first guess in line 7 is followed by a pause in which assent could have been signalled. The second guess in line 9 is followed by a pause of over a second – again no assent is given. The third guess by P in line 11 is a repetition, overlapped by an aside to noisy kids, during which N (the producer of the original trouble source) produces a slight eye-brow-flash (marked EBF in the transcript) which on Rossel can indicate assent (see Figure 3.9, still (c)). N follows this with a head-point over his shoulder to the home base of the referent – see Figure 3.9, stills (d)–(e). The fourth guess, in line 14, is a rephrasing of the prior one (‘Kpâputa’s wife’ becomes ‘Kpâputa’s widow’), and this overlaps with a reintroduction of the referent by N as ‘that girl’ (now with an unmarked deictic like English ‘that’), and is received by a more expansive eye-brow-flash giving assent (Figure 3.9, stills (g)–(h)). The sequence then lapses.

(20) (R03\_v6 8:09)

1. N: **wu** *ámââdí* a kèdè Thursday ngè anè lóó  
That girl told me she would go across on Thursday
2. (0.6)
3. P: *n:uu ngè?*  
Who did?
4. (0.8)
5. N: ° (*yi*                      *ámââdí*) °  
That.mentioned girl
6. (1.2)
7. P: *Mby:aa tp:oo módó (ngè)*  
The daughter of Mby:aa did?
8. (0.6)
9. M: *Kpâputa u kpâm?*  
Kpâputa’s wife?
10. (1.2)
11. P: *Kpâputa u kpâm?*  
Kpâputa’s wife?
- [



Still 3



Still 4



Still 5



Figure 3.9 (continued overleaf)

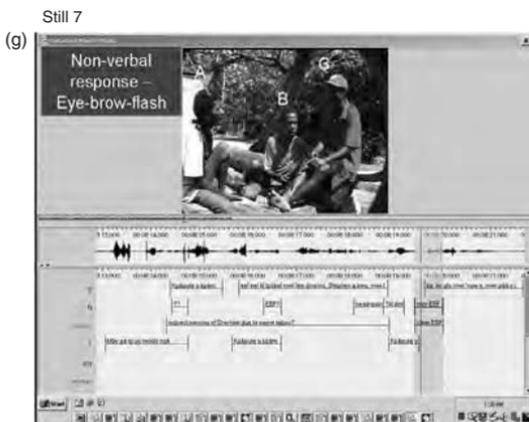
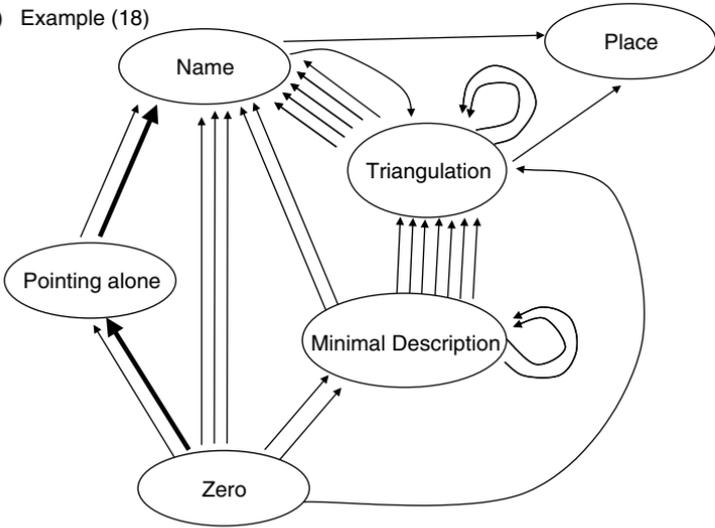


Figure 3.9 (a)–(h) Stills from Example (21).

(a) Example (18)



(b) Example (19)

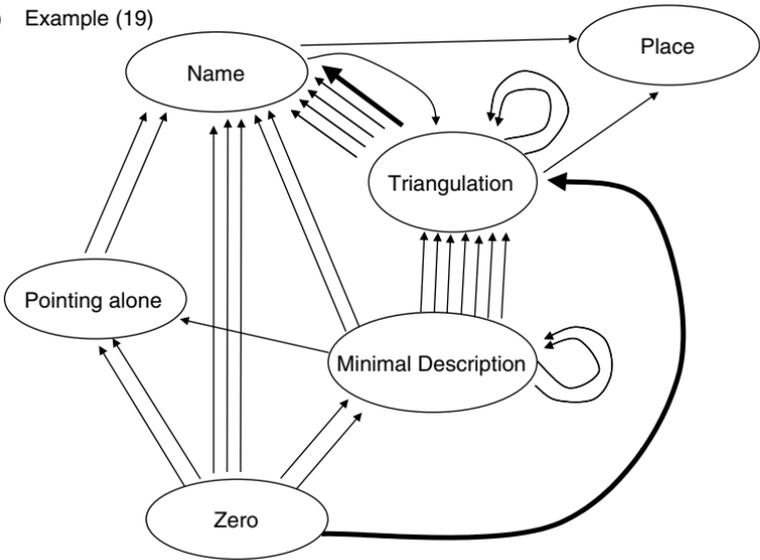


Figure 3.10 (continued overleaf)

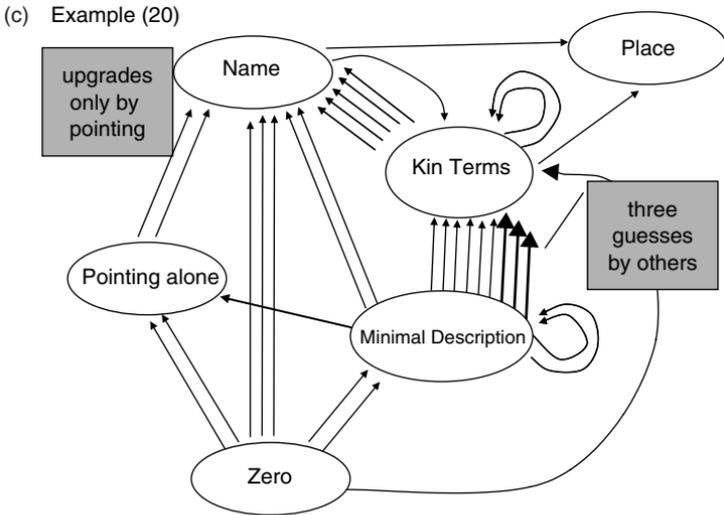


Figure 3.10 Superimpositions of upgrade routes (bold) over the general pattern in Figure 3.6. (a) Example (18), (b) Example (19), (c) Example (20).

Examples (18) and (19) we get reluctant upgrades by the speaker of the original trouble-source, and finally get a name. But (20) contains no verbal upgrade by the speaker of the original trouble-source at all – he merely points and eyebrow flashes.

The different kind of trajectory in (20), in effect *refusal* to name as opposed to *reluctance* to name, is accounted for by the Rossel principles of name-tabooing. It transpires that N is referring to his own daughter-in-law, already widowed because his son has died. This is a close affine, connected with a recently deceased close kinsman, which by the rules sketched in (7) entails a taboo on the name.

The point we can extract from the examples here is that Circumspection – the force that makes a name a last, rather than a first, resort – has different kinds of motivations. In Example (18) K intended to convey by hints, rather than openly broadcast, his political plan. In Example (19) K seems reluctant to publicly name his debtors, and seems to think that his interlocutor should be able to discern who they must be. In general, politics, gossip, politeness, as well as strict taboo are all motivations behind Circumspection.

What is the relation between mere Economy and more motivated Circumspection? Economy is required to explain how, when doing ‘reference simpliciter’ (Schegloff 1996a, this volume), we prefer, say, a first name (*John*) over first name plus last name (*John Rankin*) when the first name alone will do (achieve recognition). Or why we tend to use one referring expression (*George*

*Bush*) rather than two (*George W. Bush, president of the United States*). Circumspection on the other hand is required to explain why that economical and sufficient strategy isn't always used. Not using the economical solution is one of the major causes in the Rossel data for the conversational deviations sparked by the initiation of repair – it is a potentially costly, disruptive avoidance of a simpler mini-max solution, i.e. otherwise ambiguous balancing just Recognition against Economy. We can also see now why the hierarchy of principles must be as in (21) (repeated from (6)):

**(21) Ranked Principles:**

Recognition > Circumspection > Economy

Recognition takes precedence over Economy, as Sacks and Schegloff (this volume) show. Recognition takes precedence over Circumspection, because otherwise the kind of sequences in Examples (18)–(20) would not occur – recipients pursue reference energetically until recognition is achieved, whatever the obstacles, taboo notwithstanding. (Recollect that on Rossel, recognizability can nearly always be presumed.) Circumspection takes precedence over Economy; otherwise it could not block certain economic solutions, like the use of a single name or a kin term in Example (20). Whether Circumspection can be relaxed, and if so how far, depends on the specific motivation (no relaxation in the case of name taboos). But if it is relaxed, it is relaxed step by step, just like Economy, as exemplified in Examples (18) and (19).

### 3.8 Taking theoretical stock

I began by suggesting that we can think about person reference as the outcome, in each case, of competing principles working on a scale of explicit reference (as in Figure 3.1). Unlike the many scales offered by linguists in the referential domain, this scale is not a theoretical construct; it is a ladder that participants can be seen to climb – that is, when a person specification is under repair, speakers escalate in specific directions. If one takes the four categories of referring expression that exhaust 98 per cent of the Rossel data, we have the escalation scale in (22) (which can be laced with pointing, yielding complex scale (17)):

**(22)**

Zero > Minimal Description > Kin Term > Name

This scale is motivated by the upgrade patterns summarized in Table 3.4 and Figure 3.7, – with only one kind of exception, upgrades are unidirectional, up the scale towards Name. The one kind of exception occurs when one has got to the end of the scale (i.e., used a name) and recognition is not achieved – which can

happen for the ethnographic reasons spelt out in Section 3.3, whereby names are not guaranteed to be uniquely referring. Such cases look like this:

(23) Repair after a name (R03\_v27\_s3 00:22:53)

- T: **ala** **Téliwà** *nìmo chii*  
 this Téliwa I am going to search for him  
 (0.5)
- Mg: **ló** **Téliwa?**  
 which Téliwa?  
 (1.0)
- T: **Kóótpidi tp:oo u wo tp:ee**  
 Kóótpidi's son's stepson (grandchild of K)
- M: **:ee** <- **NTRI?** (**invitation to correct?**)
- T: **aa, Kóótpidi tp:oo u tp:ee nìmo ye**  
 eh, Kóótpidi's son's son, that's what I am saying <- **self-**  
**correction**
- M: **Kóótpidi tp:oo u tp:ee**  
 ah, Kóótpidi's son's son
- T: **(:ee)**
- M: **u p:o tóó**  
 he's at home

But this kind of example does not undermine the scale; it merely shows that reference cannot always be achieved using just one reference form (the name here is not being replaced by a kin term; it is being supplemented by a kin term so that jointly they are sufficient).

Thus for each language and culture, by examining repair sequences, we should be able to extract scales like that in (22) entirely on empirical grounds. My prediction is that such a scale will always coincide with an underlying rationale, namely increasing constraints put on the pool of possible candidates for reference, making reference increasingly unambiguous or specific (as shown in Figure 3.11). A scale like this is part of the underlying order in this domain, where competing principles operate to select a best referring expression – these expressions are not selected out of a hat, as it were (i.e., considered one by one in random order), but rather plucked off a ladder of escalation.

The three principles promise to explain facts that hitherto seem to lack explanation. First, Recognition interpreted as ‘restrict the pool of possible referents in order to achieve recognition’ offers an explanation for the way the above scale is constructed. Earlier ideas, like minimization of form, or minimality of semantic content, do not explain the scale (where Zeros and Names are opposite ends of the scale). Economy interpreted as ‘don’t over-restrict the possible referents’ helps to explain why one would not use two

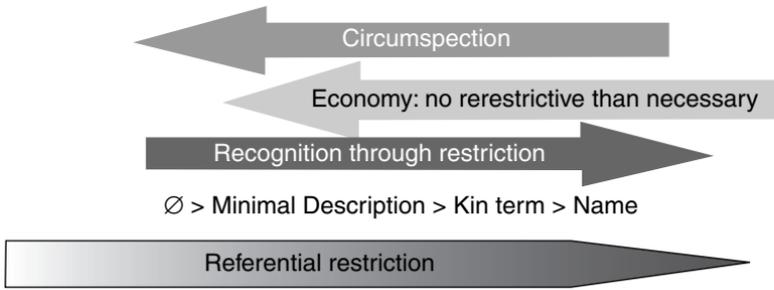


Figure 3.11 Balance of opposing forces on a scale of reference types as structured by referential restriction.

names where one would do, as well as why one would not perform two referring acts, where one would do (Sacks and Schegloff's Minimization). Circumspection motivates vaguer references, either where conventions like taboos or politeness require it, or where strategic choice as in guarded gossip motivates it.

The three competing principles – Recognition > Circumspection > Economy – seem to have a strict ordering, that is they take precedence over each other in the order shown. A speaker tries to satisfy all of the constraints concurrently, thus optimizing person-reference. When a selection proves insufficient for recognition, the next best solution is tried, by relaxing the lower ordered principles step by step – hence the directional upgrades. The model is as in Figure 3.11.

Now this volume makes clear that there are many different cultural flavours of person reference, and an overall framework ought to help us position these in some kind of possibility space. Firstly, it is clear that the scale can be different in detail. English, for example, makes quite a bit of use of brief occupational descriptions (of the kind *the tinker*, *the tailor*, *the candlestick-maker*), of titles (*Dr Watson*), of nicknames (*Shorty*), and so on. Secondly, a principle like Circumspection has largely local content, for example avoiding the use of first names for third-person reference in formal meetings in English (preferring, e.g., *The Vice-Chancellor* to *Bill*), not operative on Rossel. Likewise, English has no Rossel-like taboo on the names of affines. Third, as mentioned at the outset, the principle enunciated by Schegloff (1996a) that 'recognitionals' should be preferred to 'non-recognitionals' is important in large-scale societies, but largely otiose on Rossel, where virtually all person references are built as recognitionals (i.e., they are definite – they may be vague like 'the girl', but they are not of the form 'a girl'). Fourth, there's an intuition that there might be 'default' solutions of rather different kinds. Thus, Schegloff (1996a) suggests that in American English there is a rule of the form 'If the recipient knows the referent by name, use that name'. (In fact, this does not

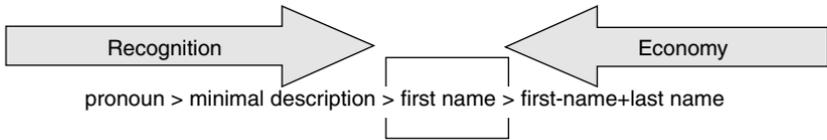


Figure 3.12 Default English person-reference?

quite have application across the board – e.g., kin terms may be the unmarked option for referring to parents and close senior kin, at least when the speaker is young.)

The notion of a default, an expected, unmarked usage, is important if recipients are meant to recognize a marked, special usage (see Stivers, this volume). Such an unmarked usage could be context-specific (taking into account the interlocutors, the formality of the situation, etc.) or it could be quite general. Schegloff's naming rule is the suggestion that, other things being equal, names are generally used in American English. It could be that this is where Recognition and Economy come to a balance of forces, schematically as shown in Figure 3.12.

If so, given the relatively small scope for Circumspection in English, we would expect by far the majority of first references to third persons to be first names – an empirically supported prediction. For Rossel, on the other hand, we might have a slightly different centre of gravity for the scale – kinship terms and names are used about the same amount and together account for 54 per cent of all usages, so perhaps the default expectation is just for either one or the other.<sup>18</sup> (It is not ruled out that the centre of gravity is actually, like English, the use of a name – for as we noted in Table 3.4, names are less likely than any other form to occasion repair, but otherwise the evidence is thin.)

If we accept Name or Kin term as the default, expectable usage, that would suggest that as soon as a Zero or Minimal Description is used, the recipients suspect Circumspection is operative, and are set to inferring both why the obliqueness, and whom is nevertheless referred to (knowing the referent must be a candidate for such oblique reference) (see Figure 3.13).

Finally, I would like to return to names, and the very general points made in the introduction. Names, as noted in the introduction, appear to be universal in semantic character (reference achieved by a baptismal event and the

<sup>18</sup> Clearly, there may be cases where a kinship term is simply better suited than a name. For example, elderly people have usually not mastered all the names of the burgeoning population of children junior by two or more generations. It would take more ethnography to settle whether in specific cases a name or kin term is an expected default usage. But for third parties not particularly closely related to the referent, it really seems that usage can go either way. And, in English, there are cases where kin terms appear to be default as in references to parents and grandparents (see Stivers, this volume).

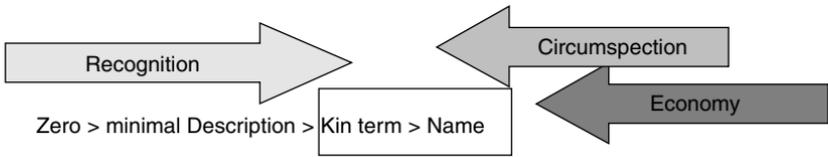


Figure 3.13 Default Rossel person-reference?

historical handing down of a naming tradition), if not in grammar or form. The function of names is to pick out *individuals* – that is, why some societies, like the Tiwi of Northern Australia (Evans n.d.), go to lengths to ensure there is only one unique individual with the same name, and in other societies, like Rossel, those who have the same name share metaphysical essence and jural identity. The peculiar semantics of names is characterized by having no descriptive content that suffices for the application of the expression – whatever the baptismal rites, being male, of such and such clan, and so on, does not make you a Stephen or a Yidika. Names go with the identities of individuals.

Having an explanation for the universal nature of personal names is certainly something we want from a theory in this domain, and perhaps the current formulation goes some of the way. For the principle of Recognition enjoins restriction, that is, using an expression that denotes the smallest set of competing referents, and nothing will do this better than an exclusive name. Even if a name picks out a small set of possible referents and thus fails to uniquely refer, the alternatives are likely to be long-winded descriptions (of the ‘author of Waverly’ sort), which themselves fall afoul of other pragmatic principles, like a maxim of Quantity (or Maxim of Informativeness, specifying semantic minimization) or Manner (specifying phonetic minimization).<sup>19</sup> Names satisfy these various constraints simultaneously: They are generally short (satisfying Manner), they are semantically minimal owing to their special semantics (satisfying Quantity or Informativeness) and they maximally constrain the referent set (satisfying Recognition). (For the full pragmatic story, see Levinson 1987, 2000:112–16.)

Another universal or strong tendency that needs explanation is that nearly all languages have *place* names too. What exactly is the common problem for both persons and places to which names are the best solution? Again recognition-by-restriction seems the source motivation – it is imperative to be able to refer to both persons and places uniquely (or at least minimizing ambiguity). In addition, there may be conceptual similarities in networks of persons (as in the

<sup>19</sup> Searle (1958:591, see the introduction to this volume) claims that names get their utility precisely by avoiding possibly contested descriptions, an elaboration of this sort of arguments.

spatial idioms of kinship, *distant cousins, descendants*, etc.) and networks of places (see Enfield 2005). Certainly on Rossel, owing to patrilocal residence, location in space mirrors location in genealogy (just as many European surnames are borrowed from place names): Knowing that so-and-so is the son of Kee is to know where he lives, and knowing where he lives together with his age is likely to make him a son of Kee. The close connection between person reference and pointing exploits this homology between the spatial and genealogical domains.

Seeing names as devices that individuate while optimizing many other pragmatic constraints might reinvigorate the ethnography of naming. Provided we can recognize names in the local language system, then we can look and see what the locals find worthy of naming – objects of such importance that they need unambiguous reference. We live in a world populated by proper names, of buildings and landmarks (the Parthenon, the Statue of Liberty), of ships and airplanes (the Titanic, Airforce One), of landscape features (the Matterhorn), of pets and working animals (Red Rum, Lassie), of operas and groups (La Traviata, the Republican party) and above all the multitudes of brand names that seek to individuate types in a sea of industrial tokens. In contrast, Rossels are rather more restrained, and just as well given the seriousness with which they treat namesakes. Canoes do not have names (although Western-style big boats do). Dogs may have nicknames, as may pet birds, but they don't need to have them. On the other hand, as mentioned, pigs have human names. And gods have names, and although they do not belong to the set of current human names, they are humanoid names. As a result, all sorts of natural features (rocks in the sea, mountain peaks, copses of mangrove) have humanoid names, because they are the avatars or abodes of gods (Levinson, in press). Place names abound, but many of them denote village sites and old village sites, and carry with them the memory of their founders. Thus, many place names identify both places and humans or humanoids – the landscape is peopled by spirits, and named accordingly. Finally, there is a curiosity of Rossel metalanguage. The word for name (*pi*) is the word for person, and for many things with names (but not actually ordinary place names) one questions a name with *n:uu* 'Who?' (as in *nkéli u pi n:uu?* 'The boat's name is who?'). A name thus seems to confer some special human-like properties on objects in the world.

As laid out in the introduction to this volume, person reference is a topic that lies at an important intersection of cognition, social organization and language. Prospectors who dig at this intersection in any single society will find that the riches they unearth simultaneously address the organizational particularities of the society they are working in, and enormously general principles that play an important role in structuring human interaction and language use anywhere on

the planet. In this chapter, I have tried to show that, on the one hand, many aspects of Rossel Island social structure and language use are informatively revealed by working on this topic (e.g., name taboos, pointing practices, the ‘essential’ qualities of names), and, on the other hand, I have tried to sketch some of the intricately interconnected principles (e.g., Recognition, Circum-spection, Economy and the ranking of them) that seem to structure this domain and have culture-independent application.