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Cohesive writing

2. Reference: tracing threads

When we create texts, we constantly refer to things and ideas which we have already presented within the text. For example, we may refer to ***the government of Australia*** and later to ***it***, or we might refer to ***Australia*** and later to ***this country***. Also, we can present an idea, for example ***that social inequality is increasing***, and later refer to it as ***this fact***. We can think of this constant process of reference as **drawing threads** through a text. If we do not refer to ideas and things clearly and consistently, the thread will be lost.

In English whenever we refer to an idea or thing, we have to make clear to our listener or reader whether the thing's identity is known or not. We do this with reference items. For example: (the reference items are in bold)

> *A man knocked on the door.*

In this example, we don't know which man is knocking, so the word 'a' functions here to introduce the man to the listener/reader. The listener/reader, however, does know which door is being referred to: either it has already been mentioned in the story (that is, if this sentence were written), or if the sentence were part of a conversation the listener could work out ***which door*** from the surroundings. Once the man is introduced to the listener/reader, he can then be referred to as ***he***, or ***the man***: we know which one is meant; the one that ***knocked on the door***. In a conversation it is possible to **see** what or who the other person is referring to, so it isn't always necessary to elaborate. For example:

> *He said to me, "Are these yours?"*

The only way we would know to what ***these*** referred is if we had been present when the conversation took place. In spoken language we can refer to things in our surroundings using reference items such as ***this, that, it,*** as we presume our listener can see, or can infer what we are referring to. In written language the reference items generally only refer to things mentioned in the text. Mostly we need to track backwards to find out what the reference item refers to: for example,

> *Julia Costello is facing a difficult situation at Western Technologies Corporation. She has difficulty functioning in the executive team. This situation is explained in terms of team dynamics and a number of solutions is included.*[1]

This situation refers back to the noun phrase ***difficulty functioning in the executive team***. However, we can also use reference items to refer forward to items which have not yet been introduced:

> *Julia Costello's problem is this: she has difficulty functioning in the executive team.*

In this example ***this*** refers forward to the rest of the sentence. The process of referring to other items in the text creates cohesion because threads are established between the reference words and what they refer to.

1. Conjunction: linking words

2. Reference: tracing threads

3. Lexical cohesion: words that go together

4. Paragraph development

Learning objectives

This module will help you to:

- understand the concept of cohesive writing
- be familiar with the main language tools which create cohesion in writing. These are:
  - conjection (*and, but*, etc.)
  - reference (*the people – they*, etc.)
  - lexical cohesion (*words that go together*)
  - paragraph development
- use these tools to create writing that flows and guides the reader

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Consider the way in which items are referred back to, or retrieved in the following text in table 1 about the moral responsibilities of scientists. The arrows show what the reference items refer to. Note: only some reference words have been highlighted.

Table 1: Reference items and what they refer to

With the increasing expansion of experimental science, particularly in the area of genetics, scientists have become more and more involved in the nature of the world's future. It has been argued that scientists have no moral responsibility for the use or misuse of their discoveries; however, **this** oversimplifies the issue. It ignores the fact that top-level research scientists are not ordinary people. Since their duty is to do no basic harm to their society, a society which has trained them and which funds their research, they should suppress those scientific discoveries which might be misused, and which ordinary people do not know about.

There are a number of reasons for **this**. In the first place, as individuals or as members of a research team, scientists are in a position to know what is going on at a given moment in their field, nationally and internationally. They are in a position to know what has been discovered and in which field crucial discoveries are likely to be made.

adapted from: A. Smith (1985) *Towards a Safer World*, Bogus Press, London.

What are the reference items?

There are three types of reference item (Halliday, 1985, p. 290-295):

- pronouns (*I, we, they, it* etc.)
- demonstratives (*this/that, these/those,* and *the*)
- comparative reference (*another, more, such* etc.)

One thing to note from the paragraph on scientists is how useful reference items can be to refer to clauses, whole sentences, and even paragraphs. For example, in the first paragraph the demonstrative *this* refers to the previous clause; the argument that *scientists have no moral responsibility for the use or misuse of their discoveries.* The *this* in the second paragraph refers to a longer chunk of text: namely, the sentences in the first paragraph from *It ignores …* to the end of the paragraph. Demonstratives and comparative reference can be a useful alternative to conjunctions such as *first, second, third,* when structuring your argument in an essay. That is, you could begin the paragraphs with phrases such as *A major argument …, another reason …, such arguments.* Similarly, instead of writing *In conclusion*, it would be possible to begin the conclusion section with *These arguments show ….*

The system of reference in English is very complex, and it can only be talked about here in regards to its importance for cohesive writing. Not all languages use words like *a, the, these* etc. as English does, so this aspect of English can cause English learners a lot of headaches! This is not to say that native speakers are exempt from problems with reference. Two common problems with reference for native speakers of English are using the correct pronoun (singular or plural), and avoiding ambiguity when using *it*.

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Which pronoun?

The pronoun we use depends on whether what we are referring to is **human or non-human**, and whether it is **singular or plural**. If referring to a human, we must distinguish between **male and female**. This is shown for third person pronouns in the table below.

	singular	plural
human		
male	he	they
female	she	
non-human	it	they

The use of *she/he* to refer back to a singular (human) noun, such as *student*, can cause some writers to make errors. For example, writers trying to avoid writing *he* to refer to a singular male or female noun can fall into the trap of using a singular noun such as *student* in the first half of the sentence, then the plural pronoun *they* to refer to *student*. For example:

incorrect: *Once a student has selected from the menu, they can see what examples are available.*

correct: *Once a student has selected from the menu, she or he can see what examples are available*

or *Once students have selected from the menu, they can see what examples are available.*

Is *it* clear?

When we use the pronoun *it* to refer back to items already mentioned in a text, we must be certain that it is clear **which item** is being retrieved. One way to avoid ambiguity is to only use *it* to refer to an item already mentioned in the same sentence, or the sentence immediately preceding. For example,

> Although *television violence* can have damaging effects on children's social development, *it* has not been reduced by censorship measures.

If there is ambiguity about what is being referred to, consider using another type of reference such as a demonstrative item such as *this* plus the main part of the noun to which you are referring: for example, *The International Monetary Fund …, this fund*.

It is not only used to refer to preceding items in a text, it can also be used to refer to items which have not yet appeared, as in the following example. Here *it* refers forward to *the decision*.

> Though the need to dispose of convicts may have been the stimulus behind *it*, *the decision* could not possibly have been made without looking at the larger picture.

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Task 2.1 Pronoun or demonstrative reference?

Fill in the blank spaces using either pronouns (*she, he, it, they* etc), or demonstratives (*this, that, those* etc).

1. High salinity in soils is a problem facing many farmers in Australia. _____ is shown by recent studies focussing on the effects of intensive logging on land productivity.

2. The structural analysis of texts has become increasingly important to linguists in recent years. In fact, _____ is now an essential component of most linguistic inquiry.

3. After heated debate, the legislation was finally passed. However, _____ has now been shown to have been racially discriminatory.

4. Testing in schools often involves high levels of artificiality. _____ can lead to a misrepresentation of students' actual ability.

Task 2.2 Choosing the correct pronoun

Insert the appropriate pronouns in the blank spaces below (for example, *she, they, it*).

Democracy has provided greater opportunities for women in many countries, however, _____ still face the pressures of dealing with traditional gender roles. In many cases, religious persuasion can affect the degree to which women are willing to challenge their roles. Often, _____ can prevent women from changing altogether, thereby reinforcing the status quo. Within some contexts, a woman can be punished if _____ is seen to be contradicting religious doctrine.

Task 2.3 Singular or plural?

In the following excerpt from a philosophy essay there are several errors caused by lack of agreement in number between the pronouns and what they refer to. Can you find them.

There are two ways of arguing that passive euthanasia can be justified while active euthanasia cannot. The first relies on the intuition that killing someone is morally worse than letting them die. It is argued that a doctor who kills their patient directly causes their death, but a doctor who withdraws or withholds treatment merely allows that death.

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Task 2.4 Making it clear

Read the following text and underline any uses of *it* which have an unclear referent. Edit the text to clarify these references.

> The country's economic situation is becoming more serious each year, with inflation and unemployment constantly rising. In fact, according to the latest figures, it has reached the highest levels ever in recent months. The government has taken measures to address the economic crisis, but they have not yet succeeded in alleviating the problem. Rather, it[2] seems that corruption and nepotism are becoming more and more entrenched among government officials. Serious restructuring of the economy and political system are required if it is to overcome this crisis.

To check your answers see the Key at the end of this unit.

The role of synonyms in establishing threads in your writing

Synonyms can play a useful role in establishing threads in your writing. Synonyms are words with the same meaning, such as 'big' and 'large', or 'harmful' and 'detrimental'. We can use synonyms to refer to items already mentioned in a text, for example, we could write:

> *The International Monetary Fund (IMF)* announced conditions on its recent decision to assist debtor countries. Since its creation, *the organisation* has imposed structural readjustment on many of the world's poorer nations.

Since *organisation* is presented as *the organisation* rather than *an organisation* the reader must be able to work out which organisation is meant: and this is the case - the reader can work that *the IMF* and *the organisation* are the same thing. This aspect of reference can reduce repetition in a text, without breaking the thread of meaning. However, it is most important to ensure that the synonyms used are **accurate**. One way to find synonyms is to consult a thesaurus. If you do this, be sure to check your choice of synonym in a dictionary. You can also familiarise yourself with common synonyms used within your discipline by paying close attention to those used in the articles and books you read.

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Key

2.1 Pronoun or demonstrative reference?

1. High salinity in soils is a problem facing many farmers in Australia. **This** is shown by recent studies focussing on the effects of intensive logging on land productivity.

2. The structural analysis of texts has become increasingly important to linguists in recent years. In fact, **it** is now an essential component of most linguistic inquiry.

3. After heated debate, the legislation was finally passed. However, **it** has now been shown to have been racially discriminatory.

4. Testing in schools often involves high levels of artificiality. **This** can lead to a misrepresentation of students' actual ability.

2.2 Choosing the correct pronoun

Democracy has provided greater opportunities for women in many countries, however, **they** still face the pressures of dealing with traditional gender roles. In many cases, religious persuasion can affect the degree to which women are willing to challenge their roles. Often, **it** can prevent women from changing altogether, thereby reinforcing the status quo. Within some contexts, a woman can be punished if **she** is seen to be contradicting religious doctrine.

2.3 Singular or plural?

There are two ways of arguing that passive euthanasia can be justified while active euthanasia cannot. The first relies on the intuition that killing **someone** is morally worse than letting **him or her** die. It is argued that **a doctor** who kills **his or her *patient*** directly causes ***the patient's*** death, but a doctor who withdraws or withholds treatment merely allows that death.

Note: *the patient's death* has been used to avoid further repetition of *his and her*, and this solution is preferable to the plural form in this case. Also, it is becoming more acceptable to use a plural pronoun to refer to words such as *someone, everybody*. In other words *killing someone is morally worse than letting them die*, would also have been possible.

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2.4 Making it clear

> The country's economic situation is becoming more serious each year, with inflation and unemployment constantly rising. In fact, according to the latest figures, **it** has reached the highest levels ever in recent months. The government has taken measures to address the economic crisis, but they have not yet succeeded in alleviating the problem. Rather, it seems that corruption and nepotism are becoming more and more entrenched among government officials. Serious restructuring of the economy and political system are required if **it** is to overcome this crisis.

Note: In the first instance (*it has reached the highest levels*) the writer intended *it* to refer to the items *inflation and unemployment*. Here the writer should have written *these have reached the highest levels in recent months.*

In the second instance the confusion could be avoided by using the passive voice and leaving out *it*. That is, *Serious restructuring of the economy and political system are required if the crisis is to be overcome.*

References

Halliday, M.A.K. (1985). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Arnold: London.

Endnotes

1. Example from Lecture Notes and Workbook, English Language Studies II, University of Wollongong, 1998.

2. Note that here *it* is not a reference item but is the subject placeholder in a cleft sentence.

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