

Effects of animacy and gender on the choice of referring expression

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In communication, speakers constantly choose between different types of referring expressions to refer to discourse entities. Previous research (Chafe, 1976; Ariel, 1988; Gundel, Hedberg and Zacharski, 1993, among many others) has suggested that this choice depends on the degree of accessibility associated with each referent. In a story completion experiment, the effects of animacy and gender on the production of definite noun phrases and pronouns are investigated. Results show that, overall, pronominalization rates are negatively affected by the presence of two human referents, irrespective of their gender. In other words, even when a pronoun would non-ambiguously point to the intended referent, the presence of another human referent increased the use of definite noun phrases. These effects suggest that the accessibility of referents is affected by competition in terms of animacy. On a more general level, this study deepens our understanding of the different linguistic factors that are at work in the process of referring.

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