An Overview of Reference Study

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Abstract: This paper provides an overview of reference study, focusing on its definition, importance, methods, and current research trends both abroad and in China. Reference is a fundamental linguistic function that explains the relationship between words and the specific objects they name. The authors highlight the significance of reference in philosophy and linguistics and emphasize the need for further investigation, particularly considering the unique characteristics of Chinese characters. The paper discusses the importance of referential reviews in integrating research results, identifying trends and knowledge gaps, developing theories and concepts, providing practical guidance, and promoting interdisciplinary communication. The methods employed in referential study, including systematic search, data analysis, and interpretation, are described in detail. The current situation of reference study abroad is examined, with a focus on rising analysis on pragmatic reference, deeper research on mental reference, multi-dimensional research on reference mechanism, and relatively independent research on reference. The state of reference research in China is also explored, highlighting the introduction and interpretation of foreign reference theories, as well as the emergence of local referential thought. Finally, the paper suggests future directions for domestic referential study, such as incorporating new ideas from abroad, conducting corpus analysis, and modernizing and localizing referential theories in Chinese linguistic context.

Keywords: reference; pragmatic reference; mental reference; reference mechanism

Introduction
Definition of Reference
 Reference is one of the basic functions of linguistic expressions, and in semantics, reference is usually used to explain the relationship between nouns or pronouns and the specific target objects named with them. In their book *Discourse Analysis*, Brown and Yule[1] define reference as "speakers express the entities they are talking about through the use of language". The word "language" is the reference word, and "the entity being talked about" is the referent.
 In actual discourse, words are frequently employed to represent specific people or things, establishing a one-to-one correspondence between the word and the referred object in a particular language context. This correspondence is referred to as referential relation, with the word being the referent. The "referent" here includes things, properties, actions, quantities, etc. Zhang[2] believes that human cognition of objective things starts from feelings, gradually forms concepts, and then names them, which is reference. When something is named, it is also called reference. When people communicate, they give reference specific content. When we discuss the reference of nouns, the terms used include referential, non-referential, general reference and generic reference. At this time, we focus on the relationship between symbol and entity. In grammatical analysis, reference is also used to illustrate an identity relationship between grammatical units.
Importance of the Study
Reference is a concept which has attracted much attention in both the field of philosophy and linguistics. The complexity of reference itself is influenced by various factors, including the unique characteristics of Chinese characters. This adds to the intricacy of the problem, making it worthy of further study.
The conduct of referential review can help integrate, summarize and evaluate existing research results in order to provide a comprehensive and systematic understanding and knowledge base to the development of referential study.
Integrate Research Results: The field of reference research covers a wide range of topics, theories and methods. Reviews can bring together and integrate various types of research, including empirical research, theoretical discussion, empirical and theoretical combination, etc., to provide a comprehensive overview of research for researchers in the field.
Identify Research Trends and Knowledge Gaps: By reviewing existing research, it is possible to identify existing research trends and areas of focus, to understand which areas have been studied in depth, and where there are knowledge gaps and issues requiring further research.
Develop Theories and Concepts: The review of reference study can help to sort out and evaluate the development and evolution of different theories and concepts, explore their application and effect in the understanding and use of

reference, and provide a basis for future theoretical construction and conceptual framework.

Provide Practical Guidance: Referential research reviews can provide guidance and recommendations for practical applications. For example, in the field of language education and intervention, reviews can summarize effective strategies for teaching reference and intervention methods to help educators and clinical professionals better support and promote reference development in practice.

Promote Interdisciplinary Communication: Referential research review can build a bridge of interdisciplinary communication, integrate research results in linguistics, psychology, pedagogy and other fields, and promote mutual learning and cooperation among disciplines.

Indicate Directions for Future Research: The review can identify and propose the focus and direction of future research, guide researchers to carry out targeted research in the reference field, fill the knowledge gap, and promote the further development of the field.

Methods of Referential Study

Systematic Search: A systematic search involves carefully designing search strategies and criteria to identify relevant scholarly articles, books, and other relevant sources. This typically includes searching electronic databases, libraries, and academic journals using specific keywords and filters.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria: The author establishes inclusion and exclusion criteria to select study that meet specific criteria for the literature review. These criteria can be based on factors such as publication date, research design, sample size, geographic location, and relevance to the research topic.

Data Analysis and Integration: Once the relevant data has been extracted, the author analyzes and integrates the findings from the included study. This process involves identifying common themes, patterns, and trends across the literature, and organizing the information in a coherent and meaningful manner.

Interpretation and Discussion: The interpretation and discussion stage involves critically examining the integrated findings and discussing the implications. The author identifies gaps in the literature, highlights areas of agreement or disagreement among study, and proposes future research directions based on the insights gained from the literature review.

Documentation and Reporting: Finally, the findings of the literature review are documented and reported in a clear and structured manner. This includes writing a comprehensive review article or report that summarizes the key findings, methodologies used, and the overall implications for the research topic.

Overall, these methods ensure that the literature review is conducted in a systematic, rigorous, and transparent manner, providing a comprehensive and reliable integration of the existing research on this topic.

The Current Situation of Referential Study Abroad

The problem of reference is both classical and modern. Through a specific analysis of the literature, the research trends can be summarized as follows:

Rising Analysis on Pragmatic Reference

In recent years, many scholars have studied linguistic referential behavior in communication, taking the names of objects as the starting point for philosophical speculation with the supplementation of corpus analysis. Abbott[3] (2010), from Michigan State University wrote the book *Reference*, which was based on the philosophy of language and provided a brief history of referential problems from two dimensions, and then explained the selection and understanding of reference words in behavior with the help of corpus analysis. Korta and Perry[4] (2011) from the University of California co-authored *Critical Pragmatics: An Inquiry into Reference and Communication*, which studied the theory of reference at the level of philosophy and pragmatics and analyzed specific referential behaviors based on communicative corpus. They distinguished three types of the co-reference: It is argued that the generic reference (the case where the generic name has a specific referent object) is an incomplete descriptor, which is the embodiment of the incremental nature of language; backgrounding reference doesn't not involve truth value and should be analyzed from the perspective of integrity; misreference, as an inaccurate descriptor, conveys false information and true belief, which generally does not affect the communicative efficacious behavior. It can be seen that after decades of debate and reflection on classical theories, reference theory as a self-constraint system is becoming more and more mature, and scholars are beginning to pay attention to the interpretative power of reference theory to everyday language.

Deeper Research on Mental Reference

Mental reference is a method to study reference from cognitive science. Mental reference and individual concept correspond to linguistic reference and referent respectively and are used to analyze the cognitive problems of reference. Cambell[5] (2002) from the University of California, Berkeley, wrote *Reference and Consciousness*. On the basis of distinguishing what referential knowledge is and what referential knowledge does, he believed that subjects can distinguish referents not on the basis of class concepts, but on constraint systems. He also analyzed the cognitive mechanism and specific process of demonstrative pronouns realizing the referential role with examples. Powell[6] (2010) from the University of London wrote *Language, Thought and Reference*, which regarded individual concept as subjective cognitive entity, and proposed the difference between individual concept satisfying the conditions and that

conforming to relations. Thus, the relation of language, thought and reference is transformed into proper name, individual concept and individual relation. Pepp[7](2020) studies the cognitive psychology of reference, and believes that the study of linguistic reference often involves mental reference, which is the basis of linguistic reference. The ability to use existing linguistic referents to create linguistic ones depends on the pre-ability to think about such things.

Multi-dimensional Research on Reference Mechanism

Reference mechanism refers to how words refer to objects, and the study has gone through the development process of "two-dimensional - three-dimensional - four-dimensional". Minimalist Semantics (and truth-value semantics) adhere to the traditional two-dimensional semantic reference and reference object. Moderate Context pays attention to the pragmatic reference mechanism, which initially is three-dimensional --- the speaker refers to the object with words, and gradually develops to four-dimensional --- the speaker refers the object to the addressee with words. Prince[8][9](1981,1992) analyzed how the familiarity of the referent affected the process of text information organization from the perspective of the speaker. Ariel[10][11](1990, 1991) studies different forms of reference expressions and believes that speakers choose referential expressions according to the accessibility of referent. Gundel, Hedberg and Zacharski[12](1993) hypothesize the denotation cognitive state of the speaker to the addressee, set different levels of "givability" on the basis of this hypothesis, and further select specific reference expressions. Wettstein[13] (2004) believes that the research on the speaker's reference selection mechanism and on the recipient referent recognition mechanism complements each other, and the comprehensive research is the complete pattern of reference research.

Relatively Independent Research on Reference

The study of referents includes two questions: whether the referents exist and how to determine them. Previously, research on referent objects was often intertwined with discussions on referential thoughts. However, it has now emerged as an independent research topic, with a focus on non-existent objects as referent objects. Sainsbury[14] (2007) studies referential expressions without referents, such as the referent problem of proper names and descriptors in novels. Schipper[15](2019) studies the referential problem of non-being. Nelson[16] (1992) divides the problem of how to determine referents into two stages, naming and causal reference chain, and discusses them respectively.

The Current Situation of Reference Research in China

The study of reference in China is mainly based on the introduction and interpretation of foreign reference theories. *Reference, Word Order and Semantic Interpretation* by Xu Lijiong[17] (2008), *Language, Meaning and Reference* by Ye Chuang[18] (2010), and *The Meaning and Reference of Proper Names* by Luo Chuanwei[19] (2013) etc. are the typical works on reference study, which ponder the question of reference from a philosophical and social cognitive perspective. Related translations of reference theory have emerged one after another: Yin Jie & You Yang's[20](2007) *The Relation between Named and Referent Words and Objects* and Xue Enkui's[21] (2011) *Sentence Semantics and Non-referent Words* which examine the question of reference from two different linguistic units: word and sentence. In general, the achievements of reference study are increasing gradually in recent years. Through a specific analysis of literature, the research trends can be summarized as follows:

Interpretation of Classical Thoughts, while Tracking Foreign New Thoughts

So far, most of the articles searched with the keyword "reference" in CNKI are titled with the mode of "XX reference theory", which shows that many domestic reference study focuses on sorting out the personal thought of some scholars. Most of the other comprehensive research articles are about the evolution of reference theory or academic views, etc. They also introduce foreign hot issues such as the reference problem of fictitious names (Xu Min[22], 2019), the latest progress of reference study in contemporary Western philosophy of mind (Song Rong and Yang Yu[23], 2021), foreign research on cognitive ontology of referents (Zeng Xiaorong and Ma Bosen[24], 2015).

Richness of Research Mode, while a Trend of Local Referential Thought

By analyzing and searching papers, it can be found that there are two common study modes: one is the reference theory of a certain philosopher - which philosophers have offered agreement or disagreement or rebuttal - and how to respond to these disagreements or rebuttals in a particular philosophical position; the other is how to interpret the referential views of the two philosophers: the background of their ideas and the understanding or misunderstanding of the connection and difference between their ideas. At the same time, reference analysis in discourse (Le Yao[25], 2017; He Yingying[26], 2008; Kong Wensheng[27], 2007), the referential meaning of Chinese relational structure (Xiong Ling[28], 2018), the symbolic referential function of Chinese (Wang Jun[29], 2020), the acquisition of sentence-final inflections and mental verbs in Chinese children (Zhang Di[30][31], 2019; 2022) and many others are localized reference study.

Diversity of Research Perspective, while a Trend of Interdisciplinary Research

Traditional reference study is speculative within the framework of philosophy, while modern research perspectives are increasingly diversified and thus interdisciplinary study is emerging. Typical opinions are as follows: the examination of the reference function of modern Chinese instrumental verbs(Gao, Hang[32], 2022), reference as a way to construct discourse series (Lv, Mingchen and Xu, Chunyan[33], 2016), both the illustration of the linguistic reference problem from the perspective of pragmatics and context, which believe that reference depends on the use or context, the determination of reference being a contextualization process (Cui, Fengjuan[34], 2018), and empirical research on transreference from a cross-cultural perspective (Li, Jincai[35], 2018), etc. Reference has gradually become a method and a perspective to provide methodological guidance for other study.

The Future Direction of Domestic Referential Study

First of all, the new achievements of referential study abroad in the 21st century should be introduced, especially the ideas of pragmatic study and discourse analysis. Such as Abbott[3](2010), Perry[4](2011), Recanati[36](2010), Cambell[5](2002), et al. Reference theory in philosophy of language and reference phenomenon in pragmatics can be used as two channels to carry out interdisciplinary research, especially to pay attention to the new theories and ideas derived from the interface.

Secondly, it should break through the current situation that reference study is confined to philosophical speculation, and explain concrete reference phenomena through corpus analysis. Pragmatics theory and relevance theory are used to analyze examples of Chinese and English corpus, and to explain the selection and use of referent words and the recognition of referents in communication such as co-reference, referential reference, misreference and null reference.

In particular, dynamic referential phenomena can be analyzed based on corpus, including the selection of referential words, the recognition of referents, and the achievement of communicative purpose. Among them, co-reference refers to the situation in which multiple expressions in a text have the same referent. It can study the conditional co-reference, coincidence relation co-reference, intentionality co-reference, and attempted co-reference of intentionality. The referents of non-existent objects such as "*Golden Hill*" can be analyzed from the perspectives of object, entity, world, historical causal reference chain and individual concept in cognition. Fictitious reference studies the reference problem in fictional novels. It does not involve truth value, so the referent should be analyzed from the perspective of honesty. Allusion refers to the situation in which the general name plays the role of proper name reference in communication. Allusive reference is an incomplete descriptor, which is also the embodiment of the incremental nature of language. It can be analyzed in the framework of relevance theory that the speaker's reference word selection and the receiver's referent recognition in allusive behavior. We can analyze the cognitive basis of metaphorical reference form and the reasoning process of referent recognition. The misreference can be studied in two cases: one is when the speaker successfully refers to a specific object using only the wrong referential word, which is an inaccurate description that conveys false information and true belief, and generally does not affect the success of communication; the other is when the addressee misunderstands the referential word used by the speaker and identifies the wrong object, leading to the failure of communication.

In the study of reference in linguistics, scholars attach importance to different elements of reference, among which anaphora is the most widely studied, especially zero anaphora in Chinese. Levinson[37](1987:379) states: "Anaphora is the phenomenon whereby one linguistic element, lacking clear independent reference, can pick up reference through connection with another linguistic element." Anaphora involves the relationship between the referential form and the previous co-referential linguistic form. The former form of co-reference is the antecedent, and the present linguistic form is anaphora form/expression. Xu Liejiong[38](2003) holds that anaphora has broad and narrow meanings. Broadly speaking, anaphora refers to the relationship between antecedent and any anaphora forms that have referential functions, such as verbs, adverbs, clauses, and noun phrases. In a narrow sense, anaphora is a co-referential relationship between an antecedent and a noun or pronoun. That is, in a broad sense, referential forms include not only linguistic forms that occur as predicates in normal sentences, but also linguistic forms that occur as arguments (Jiang Tao[39], 2008). For example, in the sentence "开心最重要。" (Being happy is very important.), "开心" usually acts as the predicate, but it is actually the subject in this sentence, which states a situation. In the sentence "我买书。" (I bought books.), "我" and "书" are often subjects and objects, and appear as arguments. In the narrow sense, reference form refers to the language form that usually acts as argument, excluding those that act as predicate.

Conclusion

To sum up, foreign reference study has always been at the center of linguistic philosophy and semantics, while domestic reference issues tend to be marginalized on the interface between linguistics and philosophy of language. Domestic referential study remains at the level of combing traditional referential thoughts, while foreign referential study has entered the stage of integrated interface study, with a pattern of linguistic, psychological and pragmatic referential study.

Therefore, on the basis of studying and introducing new ideas and thoughts from abroad, domestic referential study should analyze the linguistic referential phenomena in Chinese and start the process of modernization, systematization and localization of referential theories.

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