

The grammar of free indirect discourse: How referential means interact with other grammatical markers of free indirect discourse

This paper addresses grammatical features of so-called free indirect discourse (= FID), i. e. a syntactically independent, non-direct representation of a character's thought as marked by italics in (1a) and (1b):

- (1a) Ada staunte. *Wie schön ihre Blumensträucher heute blühten!*
'Ada was amazed. *How beautifully her shrubs were blooming today.*'
- (1b) Cem freute sich sehr. *Wie schön!* {*Morgen sah er endlich Stella wieder. / Morgen würde er endlich Stella wiedersehen.*}
'Cem was very happy. *How wonderful! Tomorrow he would finally get to see Stella again.*'
- (1c) Ada ging in den Garten. Ihre Blumensträucher blühten an jenem Tag sehr schön.
'Ada went out into the garden. *Her shrubs were in full bloom that day.*'

In contrast to the neutral narrative report in (1c), in the case of FID, the perspectives of the character and narrator appear to be intertwined (see, e.g., Fabricius-Hansen 2002; Fludernick 1995; Eckardt 2014; Lee 2020). The preterit tense and references to the character using third person personal pronouns are linked to the narrative point of view. In contrast, illocution, deictic expressions and attitude descriptions have the character as their origo and, thus, FID gives readers the impression that they are following the character's train of thought without mediation.

From a linguistic perspective, the question arises as to how the selection of discourse type is grammatically constrained. Here we are interested in the two potentially critical grammatical factors, namely tense and reference.

If we assume that instances of the preterit in narrative texts mark a retrospective narrative point of view (cf. Eckardt 2014), FID is triggered grammatically in (1a/b). The deictic adverbials *heute* ('today') or *morgen* ('tomorrow') are aligned with concurrent or prospective time and cannot, therefore, be linked to a retrospective narrative point of view. That is why the character should be selected as the origo, resulting in a case of FID. If, on the other hand, we assume that instances of the preterit in narrative texts allow an atemporal interpretation (cf. Hamburger 1977; Lee 2020; Bücking 2022), a cotemporal narrative voice could also be the holder of the amazement or happiness in (1a/b). Interpreting the text in italics as FID is still clearly more plausible here. However, under this second assumption, this would be due primarily to non-grammatical reasons, such as previously ascribing a matching attitude to a character.

Referential means could also determine the selection of discourse type. While (2a) allows FID as Ben, the character whose thoughts are expressed, is referred to with a personal pronoun, (2b) has only one reading as a neutral narrative report:

- (2a) Ben schaute aus dem Fenster. *Wie sehr er Ada vermisste!*
'Ben looked out the window. *How much he missed Ada!*'
- (2b) Ben schaute aus dem Fenster. *Wie sehr* {*Ben / der Junge*} *Ada vermisste!*
'Ben looked out the window. *How much* {*Ben / the boy*} *misses Ada!*'

We conclude from this that a necessary condition for FID is that only personal pronouns are allowed to refer to the character whose thoughts are expressed. This point has hardly been addressed systematically in the research literature to date.

Against this backdrop, on the one hand, we would like to examine whether the necessary restriction to referential means that we proposed applies to FID. On the other hand, we would like to use the assumed restriction to add new evidence to the debate surrounding the contribution of tenses to meaning in narrative texts. To do so, we carried out an experimental study that combines an acceptability rating with a forced-choice task. We systematically manipulated the factors discourse type and reference type in the items in relation to the factor levels free indirect discourse (= FID) or neutral narrative report (= NR) plus proper name (= PRN) or third person personal pronoun (= PRO):

- (3a) Ada pflückte ein paar Kirschen. Morgen würde Ada einen Kirschkuchen machen.
'Ada picked a few cherries. Tomorrow Ada would bake a cherry cake.'
(FID/PRN)
- (3b) Ada pflückte ein paar Kirschen. Morgen würde sie einen Kirschkuchen machen.
'Ada picked a few cherries. Tomorrow she would bake a cherry cake.'
(FID/ PRO)
- (3c) Ada pflückte ein paar Kirschen. Am nächsten Tag machte Ada einen Kirschkuchen.
'Ada picked a few cherries. The next day Ada baked a cherry cake.'
(NR/PRN)
- (3d) Ada pflückte ein paar Kirschen. Am nächsten Tag machte sie einen Kirschkuchen.
'Ada picked a few cherries. The next day she baked a cherry cake.'
(NR/PRO)

The factor discourse type concerns potentially sufficient grammatical markers of FID. In (3a/b), if we assume that the instances of the preterit are necessarily retrospective, the combination of the preterit in the first sentence with the *würde*-future and deictic adverbial *morgen* ('tomorrow') in the critical second sentence should lead to the latter being interpreted as FID. This results in the factor level FID in both cases. In (3c/d) the assumed grammatical cue for FID is neutralized by the anaphoric adverbial *am nächsten Tag* ('the next day') and the simple preterit. This results in the factor level NR in both cases for this control condition.

The factor reference type concerns potentially necessary grammatical markers of FID. The combination of FID and PRN should cause problems in the interpretation such that (3a) is considered to be grammatically less acceptable than (3b). In the control condition (3c/d), there is no such conflict. Moreover, in contrast to PRN, the factor level PRO should promote the selection of the character as the attitude holder.

Sixteen items were constructed for the experiment, with the factor level FID determined by the combination of the *würde*-future with a deictic adverbial (as in (3)) or an exclamation. In the control condition NR, the *würde*-future was replaced by the preterit, there were no exclamatives and the adverbials were non-deictic. In all items the reference type was determined by third person personal pronouns for the PRO condition and simple proper names for the PRN condition. The sixteen items were distributed across four lists using a Latin square design. Thirty-two distractors were added to each list; like the items, they consisted of two sentence sequences whose textual coherence was open to debate. The study was programmed in PsychoPy (Peirce et al. 2019) and run as an experiment on

<https://pavlovia.org>. Thirty-seven BA students at the universities of Tübingen and Wuppertal who had German as their first language took part in the experiment.

First of all the participants rated the acceptability of the stimulus on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “very poor” to “very good”. This task was identical for the items and distractors. In the forced-choice task that followed, the stimulus was displayed for a second time and participants could select one of two response options to a *wh*-question. For the items, the question was always formulated as “Wer {denkt/meint}, dass ...?” (Who thinks that...?) and the “Erzähler” (narrator) was always a second option alongside the character who may have expressed the thought, as in (4), for example:

- (4a) Ada pflückte ein paar Kirschen. Morgen würde sie einen Kirschkuchen machen.
‘Ada picked a few cherries. Tomorrow she would bake a cherry cake.’
- (4b) Wer denkt, dass Ada einen Kirschkuchen machen wird?
‘Who thinks that Ada will bake a cherry cake?’
- (4c) Erzähler; Ada
‘narrator; Ada’

For the distractors, the questions and responses related to the content itself, as in (5), for example:

- (5a) Klaus und Tim wollten am Donnerstag ins Kino gehen. Leider hatten beide aber keine Zeit.
‘Klaus and Tim wanted to go to the cinema on Thursday. Unfortunately neither of them had time.’
- (5b) Wer hatte keine Zeit?
‘Who didn’t have time?’
- (5c) beide Jungen; nur Klaus
‘both boys; only Klaus.’

The first part of the experiment tested the influence of reference and discourse type on the acceptability of narrative sequences. The hypothesis was that the reference type PRO would generally be rated more highly than the reference type PRN due to the repeated name penalty whereby the difference should be greater for the discourse type FID as it is only here that the reference type PRN should cue an additional grammatical conflict. The latter predicts an interaction effect for the factors reference type and discourse type while the former predicts a main effect or marginal effect for the reference type in favour of PRO. The analysis of the acceptability judgements using an ordinal mixed model did not reveal a statistically robust interaction effect but did show a statistically robust main effect for the reference type in favour of PRO within the discourse type FID. In addition, a statistically robust marginal effect was observed for the reference type in favour of PRO, averaged across both discourse types.

The second part of the experiment, the forced-choice task, tested the influence of reference and discourse type on the selection of the attitude holder. The reference type PRO and the discourse type FID should both generally promote the selection of the character as the attitude holder. That predicts a main effect or a marginal effect for the reference type in favour of PRO and a main effect or marginal effect of the discourse type in favour of FID. The analysis of the selection using a generalized linear mixed model revealed a statistically robust main effect for the discourse type in favour of FID within the reference type PRN and a statistically robust main effect for the reference type in favour of PRO within the discourse type FID. There was also a statistically robust marginal effect for the discourse

type in favour of FID, averaged across both reference types, and a statistically robust marginal effect for the reference type in favour of PRO, averaged across both discourse types.

Overall, the acceptability judgements for the items were good. In keeping with the chosen study design, we conclude that simple two sentence sequences can evoke a narrative mode. As to be expected, repeating proper names instead of using pronominal reference resulted in lower acceptability; compare the effects of the reference type on acceptability in favour of PRO. What was unexpected was the absence of an interaction effect, i. e. the observation that the reference type had the same effect on acceptability in both discourse types. The results of the forced-choice task, in contrast, met all expectations: both pronominal reference and grammatically induced FID promoted the selection of the character as the attitude holder; compare the effects of reference and discourse type on the selection of the character in favour of PRO or FID respectively. A preference for the character's perspective was only evident when the assumed necessary and sufficient markers for FID, namely reference type PRO and discourse type FID, interact.

We interpret the absence of the interaction effect in the acceptability study as follows: the effect of the reference type on the selection of the attitude holder speaks in favour of a restriction to pronominal reference in FID. At the same time, the effect of the discourse type on the selection speaks in favour of the grammatical markers used for FID really providing linguistic evidence for the attribution of applicable thoughts to the character. Contrary to what was assumed, it could be that these grammatical markers are not sufficient but merely typical grammatical markers for FID. Thus, we assume that using proper names to reference the character in examples that are actually tailored to FID does not lead to the expected devaluation because such cases are not interpreted as FID but rather as reports from a point of view of the narrator that is co-temporal with the one of the character. This supports theories of tense that do not assign instances of the preterit to a narrator's retrospection.

References

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