

Rambling on Reference

To What Do Words Refer?

It might be as clear as the hand in front of one's face that concrete nouns refer to things-in-the-world: what we can sense physically. But that makes for really tricky reference if we try to extend the idea to abstract nouns or non-nouns, which are also words that refer. The job is a lot easier (and remains a singular job rather than many jobs for every category in which reference might seem different) and more cross-linguistically relevant if words refer to ideas.

Then we can note that the hand, for some people in English, might not include the fingers, which are attached to the hand—my friend whose fingers were cut off in an accident with a table saw still has a hand, for example, not half of a hand.

And we can note that the hand, in speakers of other languages, might include the wrist but not the forearm; might include the wrist and forearm; might include the wrist, forearm, and elbow; might include anything away from the torso beyond the shoulder; might include the shoulder but not the torso.

In other words—the word 'hand', however it appears, refers not to some objectively, sensorily available thing-in-the-world but to people's ideas about those things.

What is Reference?

In linguistics and philosophy of language, reference is the symbolic representation of something by means of something else—a word or morpheme or sign, sometimes a gesture, such as pointing. The thing referred to is the referent.

The somethings and the something else's can be relatively flexible and layered: a pronoun can refer to a section of a longer work that is about a noun that refers to an idea that somebody has about something.

Also Important

With regard to written or relatively formal compositions, 'reference' also refers to an instance of letting an audience know about source materials. That's a different problem, unless one wants to stretch the idea of 'symbolic' some distance, which is entirely fair. Go for it.

IF...

If symbolic reference is the coolest thing you've ever encountered, you might be, or become, a semiotician. Semiotics is great fun. And if you just want to study symbolic reasoning without so much referring (the line is a bit tricky to find some days), that's a branch of logic and mathematics—also great fun. Reference is an enormous playground with lots of different sections and pieces of equipment.