

## The discourse functions of esphoric NPs as reference-point constructions.

This paper deals with the discourse functions of ‘esphoric NPs’, i.e. NPs of the type *the lights of a car* and *the bottom of the lake*. In previous work (Author 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006) I have argued that these NPs are binominal NPs which refer to two discourse referents and in which the first component NP (‘NP1’) is grounded by a definite determiner because its referent is identifiable through its conceptual relation with the referent of the second component NP (i.e. the NP in the *of*-phrase, ‘NP2’), as in (1).

(1) Twenty minutes later, he saw the lights of a car going north on the other side of the separated median (...) (COBUILD)

The referent ‘lights’ is introduced in the discourse by the definite NP *the lights*, signalling that its referent is presumed to be identifiable to the addressee (cf. e.g. Lyons 1999). Its identifiability derives from its conceptual relation with the referent of NP2, ‘car’, viz. a part-whole relation retrievable from general knowledge (‘cars have lights’). I have described esphoric NPs as a special type of *reference-point construction* (Langacker 1993), in which the referent of NP2 functions as a reference point for the identification of the ‘target’ referent of NP1. Esphoric NPs thus reverse the canonical order of reference point preceding target which is found in the only type of nominal reference-point construction that has been systematically studied so far, i.e. the possessive NP (Langacker 1993, 1995; Taylor 1996).

In esphoric NPs, the reference point may be either indefinite (e.g. *the lights of a car*, ‘type 1’) or definite (e.g. *the bottom of the lake*, ‘type 2’). This paper will present a systematic comparison of the two types in terms of (i) the *identifiability status* of their referents and (ii) their general *discourse function*. It will do this on the basis of close analysis of data sets of 500 examples of each NP type in extensive discourse contexts, extracted from the COBUILD corpus. The quantitative proportions of the different identifiability statuses and discourse functions, as well as the types of contexts in which they typically occur, will be brought into the characterization of the two NP types. Firstly, with regard to the *identifiability status of the referents*, the analysis will take into account statuses in between ‘given’ and ‘new’ (cf. e.g. Clark & Haviland 1977, Prince 1981, Ariel 1990, Chafe 1996). Whereas NPs of type 1 usually introduce two new referents in the discourse, NPs of type 2 feature a given or inferable reference point, while the target referent may be new or given. Secondly, it will be investigated how this links up with the *discourse functions* each NP type may fulfil. For instance, an esphoric NP may introduce a new referent in the discourse by ‘anchoring’ it to a reference point, or it may recategorize an existing referent (cf. e.g. Du Bois 1981, Ford et al. 2003, Ariel 2004). Esphoric NPs also frequently serve to bring new categorizations into the discourse, e.g. in predicative and comparative contexts.

Through the study of esphoric NPs in discourse, this paper will shed new light on the discourse functioning of nominal reference-point constructions, and particularly on the difference between reference points with definite vs. indefinite grounding. This issue has remained largely under-researched, since previous work has tended to focus on cases in which the reference point receives definite grounding, such as possessive NPs with definite genitives (e.g. Taylor 1996).

## Data

Example (1) with more context:

*He even pulled over to the side of the highway and got out to watch the lights of the plane far above him as it cruised on to the south. He climbed back into his car and drove on. Twenty minutes later, he saw **the lights of a car** going north on the other side of the separated median, and above and behind it was the aircraft, following a false trail.*

## References

(references to my own previous work have been omitted)

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