A SOCIAL ACCOUNT OF TWO UNUSUAL USES OF THIRD PERSON PRONOUNS IN HONG LOU MENG*

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You need a GB Chinese system to view the examples cited in the paper.

1. Introduction

Popular approaches to the issue of anaphora are either limited within the sentence (as in various formal grammatical theories) or looking at the linear properties of discourse (much as in Givón's earlier framework known as the Topic Continuity theory (Givón 1979)). In some more recent studies, discourse structure (see Fox 1982 and Liang Tao 1993) and perspective taking (see Li and Zubin 1990) are shown to be relevant. In this paper, we will demonstrate that there are other discourse factors which are relevant for explaining the choice of anaphoric forms in text. Specifically, we will give a social account of two kinds of unusual uses of third person pronouns in the Chinese literary classic, Hong Lou Meng (HLM), and show how the factors of social status of the speaker and of the referred entity, discourse saliency of referents, and speakers' attitude towards the referent affect the use of pronouns in written literary texts as represented by HLM.

Let us first give examples to illustrate what we mean by "unusual uses of third person pronouns" in Hong Lou Meng.

The first type can be called pronouns without antecedents. In normal cases, as is well known, a pronoun is used when there is a prior mention of the referent. In Hong Lou Meng, however, we find many instances of uses of third person pronouns which do not have a clearly identifiable antecedent to which the pronoun co-refer. This is shown in example (1).

(1) 宝玉道："我有个主意：袭人上月做了一条和这个一模一样的，他因有孝，
如今也不穿。竟送了你换下这个来，如何？"香菱笑着摇头说："不好。
他们倘或听见了倒不好。" (62回)

Here, the plural third person pronoun 他们 (they) is used, but there is no textual clue as to what it is referred to by this pronominal form, although we can infer that it refers to the people associated with the protagonists in the novel.

The second type of unusual uses of third person pronouns has to do with the mismatch in number between pronominal forms and referents, mostly involving a singular third person pronoun denoting plural entities. This is shown in example (2).

(2) 赵姨娘无法，只得同他三人出来，口内犹说长说短。探春便说："那些小丫头子们原是些玩意儿，喜欢呢，和他说说笑笑；不喜欢，可以不理他。便他不好了，也如同猫儿狗儿抓咬了一一下子，可恕就恕；不恕时也只该叫了管家媳妇们去说给他去责罚。何苦自己不尊重，大吆小喝，也失了体统。" (60回)

In this example, the pronoun is in the singular form 他 (s/he), but the antecedents clearly involve more than one entity (小丫头子们).

2. Hypothesis

In this study, we propose two separate hypotheses to account for the use of third person pronouns in Hong Lou Meng. Our hypothesis for the first type of unusual uses of third person pronouns is the negligibility principle, which states as follows:
Pronominalized referent(s) without prior mentions tend to be socially inferior or non-salient in the discourse context.

For the second type of unusual uses of third person pronouns, we propose the following:

The use of third person pronouns is not just another form of referring, but is an active tool to accomplish certain social interactional effect.

In both cases, a social account is needed. Let’s now examine the two types in turn.

3. Pronouns Without Antecedents

In the 80 chapters we have randomly checked so far, we found 35 instances of third person pronouns without antecedents. The text we used is the 120-chapter version published by Renmin Wenzhe Chubanshe (ÈËÃñÎÄѧ³ö°æÉç), Beijing, 1990. Table 1 shows the distribution of antecedent-less third person pronouns with regard to singular and plural forms.

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<table>
<thead>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>他们 (they)</td>
<td>(86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>他 (s/he)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from Table 1, the majority of the third person pronouns without an antecedent occurs with a plural form.

As we mentioned earlier, our proposal is that pronouns without antecedents are due to the negligibility principle. This principle includes two parts. In the first, a referent denoted by the pronoun is negligible due to the fact that the referent is socially inferior, or low ranking in the feudal hierarchy as represented in Daguan Yuan (大观园). In the second, the referent is negligible because it is not salient in the discourse context, i.e., it is not necessary to keep track of the identity of the reference in discourse (see Du Bois 1980 for a discussion of this point). We have evidence to support both of our claims.

Let’s first present evidence for the first part of our hypothesis, that is, the referent associated with the third person pronoun is socially inferior. Our first piece of evidence comes from the semantic content of the referent in question. A clear tendency is for the pronoun to refer to the personal attendants or entourages in 大观园 As illustrated in (3).

(3) 话犹未了，只听外间“咕咚”一声。急忙看时，原来是一个小丫头坐着
打盹，一头撞到壁上，从梦中惊醒，他怔怔的只
当是晴雯打了他一下子，遂哭着央说：“好姐姐！我再不敢了！”众人都
笑起来。宝玉忙劝道：“饶他罢。原该叫他们睡去。你们也该替换着睡。”
（73回）

Here we can infer that this antecedent-less plural pronoun refers to those personal attendants who are accompanying 宝玉 and whose rankings are probably even lower than 晴雯.

We found that in our data third person pronouns without an antecedent occur more than 70% of the time involving a referent of low ranking persons in the story, as indicated in Table 2.

| Reference to lower ranking persons | 26    | 74% |
| Reference to higher ranking persons | 1      | 0.3% |
| Reference to both high and low ranking person | 2      | 0.6% |
| Reference to others                 | 6      | 17% |
| Total                                | 35    | 100% |

Our second piece of evidence in favor of our hypothesis is that these third person pronouns are typically produced by higher ranking protagonists in the novel to refer to their personal attendants or maids (or servants). Consider example (4).
In this example, the underlined third person pronoun (他们) referring to the attendants is produced by 宝钗, a member of the mandarin family and a leading character of the novel.

Of course the feudal hierarchy in 大观园 is complex. Some attendants, such as 袭人 and 紫娟, rank higher than the other attendants whose duties are mainly of labor work. These higher ranking attendants can also use third person pronouns without clear antecedents to refer to referents lower than them. In (1), for example, we have seen a case produced by 香菱 who speaks to 宝玉. Next is an example from 绣橘 who is talking to her master 迎春.

An examination of the data shows that such pronouns are mostly produced by higher ranking characters in the story. This is clearly shown in Table 3, which summarizes the background of the speakers who produce such pronouns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background of speakers producing the antecedent-less pronouns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By members of the mandarin family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By higher ranking attendants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By low ranking attendants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No speaker involved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows that there is a clear social dimension involved in the use of the third person pronouns: higher ranking characters are free to use pronouns to refer to lower ranking characters, while lower ranking characters are in no position to use them either to refer to higher ranking characters or to refer to characters of their equal rank, and not a single case of the latter type is found in our data.

We believe that the above two types of evidence show convincingly that the use of antecedent-less pronouns has a social motivation, having to do with ways in which higher ranking characters refer to lower class characters. We now turn to the second part of our hypothesis, that is, antecedent-less pronouns may also occur when referents are not salient in the discourse context.

The non-salientness of referents is best illustrated by the fact that some of those characters are non-referential, that is, the referent does not possibly exist in the story world. This is shown in (6).

In this example, ËûÃÇ does not refer to any identifiable entity; it is an empty referent which is created by 贾母 to contrast with what she is going to do for 林黛玉’s birthday.

Sometimes the referent may exist but is not uniquely identifiable. This is illustrated in (7).

Here, we can infer from the context that the plural pronoun refers to the merchant who produces the ginseng, but the exact referent cannot be specifically identified.

### 4. Interim Summary
In the previous discussion, we have seen that third person pronouns with an antecedent is due to the negligibility principle. That is, referents denoted by the third person pronoun may be (1) socially inferior, or (2) negligible in the discourse context.

5. Mismatch In Number Between Pronouns And Referents

We now examine the cases of mismatch in number between pronouns and actual referents. Our account of these mismatch cases is that the use of pronouns in these cases is irrelevant to anaphora per se, but rather as a means to express the speaker's degrading attitude towards the addressee in the novel or to convey a negative connotation, and sometimes also to show one's superior social status over the addressee. Although we have only 4 examples in our data, there are some interesting patterns which support our explanation.

The first pattern we found is that the speaker uses the third person singular pronoun 他 to refer, with an obvious degrading color (or tune), to people of lower social status than themselves. Consider (2), reproduced as (8):

(8) 赵姨娘无法,只得同他三人出来,口内犹说长说短。探春便说: “那些小丫头子们原是些玩意儿,喜欢呢,和他说说笑笑;不喜欢,可以不理他。便他不好了,也如同猫儿狗儿抓咬了一一下子,可恕就恕;不恕时也只该叫了管家媳妇们去说给他去责罚。何苦自己不尊重,大吆小喝,也失了体统。” (60回)

In this example, the antecedent is 赵姨娘 (those minor maids), but they are referred to in subsequent text as 他 for three times. In this context, 探春 is trying to calm down 赵姨娘 down by emphasizing how insignificant these minor maids are and how 赵姨娘 should not lose her temper over these unimportant figures.

A similar case is found in (9), where 王熙凤的 maid 平儿 refers to the minor maids 彩云和玉钏儿 with the third person singular pronoun 他.

(9) 大家都忙说: “可是这话。竟是我们这里应了起来的为是。”平儿又笑道: “也须得把彩云和玉钏儿两个业障叫了来,问准了他方好。不然他们得了益,不说为这个,倒像我没了本事问不出来,烦出这里来完事,他们以后越发偷的偷,不管的不管了。”袭人等笑道: “正是,也要你留个地步。” (61回)

Here, since 平儿 is higher in status than the two minor maids, she is qualified to use the singular pronoun with a degrading attitude to refer to the maids and show her higher status.

From examples (8) and (9), it is evident that, as in the case of antecedent-less pronouns, relative social position plays an important role in the use of singular pronouns to refer to plural entities. What is more, in this type of use a degrading attitude is detected along with the display of the speakers' superior social status over the referred entities.

Sometimes the mismatch does not necessarily involve a superior social status, but the degrading or negative connotation is still evident. This may happen in the author's own narration of the story, showing the author's negative attitude towards the referred entity. Consider example (10).

(10) 贾璜夫妻守着些小的产业,又时常到宁荣二府里去请请安,又会奉承凤姐儿并尤氏,所以凤姐儿尤氏也时常资助资助他,方能如此度日。今日正遇天气晴朗,又值家中无事,遂带了一个婆子,坐上车,来家里走走,瞧瞧寡嫂并侄儿。 (10回)

It is evident that the couple 贾璜夫妻 is not spoken of in the most favorable manner from the author's point of view, hence the use of the singular pronoun in this context.

Sometimes the singular form indicates a general negative connotation, which can be seen even when the speaker is of lower status. In example (11), 马道婆 -- the equivalent of a religious medium -- uses the singular pronoun while...
referring to the children of the rich and the powerful. She comments that these people are often possessed by
demons since birth.

(11) 过了一日，就有宝玉寄名的干娘马道婆进荣国府来请安。......又向贾母道：
“祖宗老菩萨那里知道，那经典佛法上说的利害，大凡那王公卿相人家的
子弟，只一生长下来，暗里便有许多促狭鬼跟着他，得空便拧他一下，或掐
他一下，或吃饭时打下他的饭碗来，或走着推他一跤，所以往往的那些大家
子孙多有长不大的。”贾母听如此说，便赶着问：“这有什么佛法解释？”
（25回）

In this case, the use of the singular form conveys a general negative connotation, since what is being talked about
here is a negative superstitious scenario.

6. Discussion And Conclusion

We have just examined the two types of what we call "unusual uses of third person pronouns" in Hong Lou Meng. We now summarize the discussion and touch upon briefly the theoretical implications of our study.

Our study reveals that third person pronominal forms in Hong Lou Meng can be used in two unusual ways: without an antecedent or showing a mismatch in number between the pronominal form and the referred entity. We show that these unusual cases typically occur when the referent is of a lower social status or unimportant in discourse, and there can also be a degrading or negative connotation associated with the referred entity.

We believe that these findings have important implications for the understanding of anaphoric forms in general. As we mentioned at the beginning of this paper, dominant approaches to anaphora seem to have concentrated on the structural aspects of anaphora. Our study shows that anaphora can indeed be a social issue, where an understanding of the social structure of society in which referents are situated is critical for the interpretation of anaphoric forms. Furthermore, our data provide compelling evidence suggesting that pronominal forms are not merely another form of referring, but can also be a powerful tool to show social status and attitude toward what is being referred to.

Finally, the two types of unusual uses of third person pronouns in Hong Lou Meng provide new data for consideration of the historical development of the Chinese language, at least for the written genre. Whether the phenomena we discussed in this paper are exclusive of the written literary language of the late Qing dynasty or there is some historical connection involved is an interesting question which needs to be further investigated.

References


311-335.


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