

Reference Point Constructions and the Conceptual Structure of Palauan *er*

Michael B. Smith
Oakland University

Meaning is likely determined by a combination of a language's overt lexicogrammatical resources and background knowledge structures (domains) and contextually inferred information. Contextual and background knowledge play an enhanced role in meaning construction when a morpheme's conceptual content is highly schematic, as with the Palauan grammatical morpheme *er* [ər], a preposition-like word whose many uses and semantic functions seem unrelated and obscure. Similar to English *of* in signifying an intrinsic relation between two entities (Langacker 1992), *er*'s meaning is even more schematic. I argue that *er*'s conceptual content resides in its designation of an abstract *reference point construction* (RPC) (Langacker 1993); its variety of uses reflects instantiations of the RPC construed against different backgrounds in particular contexts.

Josephs (1975:84) claims that *er* has basically two unrelated uses: as a specifying word (1) (SPEC) or a relational word (2-6) (REL) that can also signify comparison (7). The word *a* is a *phrasal introducer* (PI) (for NP and VP), and standard Palauan orthography is used:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>(1) A <i>neḡlekek a meḡdakt (er) a deḡumk</i>
PI child PI afraid.of SPEC PI thunder
'My child is afraid of (the) thunder.'</p> <p>(2) Ak <i>milsuub er a skuul</i>
I was.studying REL PI school
'I was studying at school'</p> <p>(3) A <i>ngalek a lmangēl er a deḡmal</i>
PI child PI is.crying REL PI father
'The child is crying for his father'</p> <p>(4) A <i>John a mo er a Guam er a klukuk</i>
PI John PI go REL PI Guam REL PI tomorrow
'John is going to Guam tomorrow.'</p> | <p>(5) A <i>reḡunga tilobēd er a blsibs</i>
PI crab PI came.out RELPI hole
'A crab came out of the hole.'</p> <p>(6) Ak <i>smecheḡ er a teḡereḡ</i>
I sick REL PI cold
'I'm sick with a cold/I've got a cold.'</p> <p>(7) A <i>Droteo a meḡsisiich er a Toki</i>
PI Droteo PI stronger REL PI Toki
'Droteo is stronger than Toki.'</p> |
|---|--|

The absence of *er* in (1) evokes a non-specific reading where the child is afraid of thunder (*deḡumk*) in general; the presence of *er* signifies a specific, definite instance of thunder. Palauan relational phrases with *er* (boldface) variously evoke location (2), goal (3), direction/time (4), source (5), cause (6), and comparison (7), etc. (1-7) show how *er*'s uses instantiate the RPC in different domains and contexts.

RPCs consist of a conceptualizer establishing mental contact with a target entity via another cognitive-ly salient entity, the reference point, within a "conceptual region...to which a particular reference point affords direct access" (Langacker 1993:6). Langacker claims the RPC is the abstract basis for such phenomena as possessive constructions, topic-like constructions, and metonymy. In *John's car*, e.g. *John* is the reference point for locating the target, *car*. Reference points are generally always specific.

I argue that in all its uses *er* is a relational predication designating a RPC where its landmark (LM) (object) is construed as a particular reference point used to establish mental contact with its trajector (TR), the target. The target of *er* is typically a process of some type. Thus the LM of *er* in (1), *deḡumk* 'thunder', is a reference point with respect to which the target, the state of the child's fear, is mentally accessed. This use of *er* induces a specific reading of its LM, because the reference point relation requires the reference point (the thunder) be one *particular* entity that affords mental contact with the target (the child's fearful reaction). When *er* is absent, the lack of a reference point relation allows for the verbal object to be interpreted as non-specific. The specific reading of the LM of *er* in (1) thus follows as a natural consequence of *er*'s reference point sense.

The different senses of *er* in (2-7) also fall out as natural consequences of *er*'s designating a RPC against different knowledge domains or contexts. In (2) the LM of *er*, *skuul* 'school', is a reference point with respect to which the studying is located. Construing the relation between school and studying is natural, hence the usual English translation of *er* as 'at/in' in locative contexts. Similar accounts can be given for (3-6). In (4) *klukuk* 'tomorrow' is a temporal reference point for John's going to Guam, and *Guam* is a locative reference point with respect to which John's going is accessed: it is natural to construe John's going to Guam as transpiring *in/on* tomorrow; and the directional verb in (4) forces the sense that John will be going *to* *er*'s LM, *Guam*. In (7) the LM of *er*, *Toki*, is a standard of comparison (reference point) with respect to which Droteo's strength is measured.

The paper therefore shows that, because the meaning of *er* primarily resides in the reference point notion, it is greatly underspecified. The precise details of its sense must be supplied by background and contextual knowledge.