

A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF REFERENTIAL COHESION IN HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN'S "THE LITTLE MATCH GIRL"

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Abstract

This study examined the use of reference as a cohesive device in Hans Christian Andersen's fictional short story *The Little Match Girl*. The study aimed to describe the use and functions of referential items that help create continuity and unity throughout the text. The corpus of the story was analyzed through a qualitative descriptive approach based on Halliday and Hasan's (1976) theory of cohesion in English. The analysis identified three main patterns of reference, with personal references occurring most frequently, followed by demonstrative and comparative forms. These three types of reference were used mainly to maintain focus on the main character, to establish spatial relationships, and to express contrast between the girl's harsh reality and her imagined comfort. The findings indicated that cohesive reference played a central role in shaping the story's emotional tone and narrative flow, thereby contributing to research on referential cohesion in literary discourse. The study suggests that raising learners' awareness of referential cohesion can enhance their understanding of how meaning and continuity are constructed in written texts.

Keywords: discourse analysis, grammatical cohesion, reference, short story, the little match girl

Introduction

Language is not merely a collection of isolated sentences but a system for constructing meaning across connected stretches of text. For a text to be meaningful and unified, its parts must be tied together in a coherent and cohesive manner. Cohesion is a semantic relationship between elements in a text, in which the interpretation of one element depends on other elements in the text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Coherence, on the other hand, concerns the logical and systematic flow of ideas in a text, which, according to McCarthy (1991) is dependent on the cohesiveness of the text.

Cohesion and coherence are particularly essential in written discourse, where the connections between sentences are key to the readability and comprehensibility of a text. Cohesion provides the structural links that connect ideas on the surface level, while coherence ensures that these ideas form a logical and meaningful whole. As Widdowson (2007) notes, coherence involves not only the logical arrangement of ideas but also the reader's ability to interpret meaning based on contextual and experiential knowledge. Recent scholarship has further elaborated on the distinct functions and interrelationships

of cohesion and coherence, emphasizing that cohesion alone cannot guarantee coherence; rather, coherence is achieved when cohesive ties align with the overall organization and communicative purpose of a text (Alarcon & Morales, 2011; Ismi et al., 2025; Zhang, 2023).

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), cohesion is a semantic relation realized through grammatical and lexical systems. Grammatical cohesion ensures structural connectedness between different parts of a text and includes the use of reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunctions. Meanwhile, lexical cohesion refers to how lexical items relate to one another and to the overall topic. Ajam et al. (2023) define lexical cohesion as the use of lexical items to maintain textual harmony. Similarly, Alamiri and Mickan (2016) argue that grammatical and lexical cohesive elements work together to create cohesive ties among textual elements, where meaning emerges through the relationships between these elements.

Grammatical cohesion is realized through four types of devices: reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction, each serving different purposes that contribute to the connectedness of elements in the text. Understanding how these devices function within a literary text can reveal how meaning and continuity are constructed beyond sentence level. This study focuses on the structural cohesiveness of Hans Christian Andersen's short story *The Little Match Girl* by examining its referencing strategies using Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework.

Reference is one of the major types of grammatical cohesion identified in discourse analysis. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), reference occurs when the interpretation of an element in the text depends on another element for its meaning. Baker (1992) also explains that reference allows writers to avoid repetition by pointing to elements already mentioned or implied in the text. Similarly, Eggins (2004) defines reference as a cohesive resource that enables the tracking of participants and entities across clauses. Paltridge (2012) further states that reference functions as a means of maintaining coherence by signaling how different parts of a text are semantically related.

According to Fang (2020), reference items cannot be interpreted independently; instead, they direct readers to identify their interpretation from other parts of the text. This aligns with Brown and Yule's (1983) view that reference is a cohesive relation in which linguistic expressions within a text correspond to entities in the real world or to other expressions appearing elsewhere in the text. Reference devices are classified into three types: personal, demonstrative, and comparative (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 37).

Personal references are words that are grammatically categorized as *person* within the speech situation, including personal pronouns, possessive adjectives, and possessive pronouns. Demonstrative references are words used to identify the referent by its location on a scale of proximity, such as *this*, *that*, *these*, *those*, *here*, *there*, and *the*. Lastly, comparative reference refers to textual connections expressing similarity or difference. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976, as cited in Fang, 2020), comparative references can be viewed from two perspectives. First, from the likeness and unlikeness, without focusing on the degree of similarity or difference. Second, from the differences in quantity and quality, typically conveyed through comparative adjectives or adverbs.

Several previous studies have examined the use of reference types in various written texts. For instance, Muhyidina et al. (2020) investigated reference use in the Indonesian literary work *Khotbah di Atas Bukit*. Alamiri and Mickan (2016) analyzed the use of reference as a cohesive device in selected Qur'anic narratives about Abraham and Moses

across ten surahs. Dang (2020) compared the reference use in Vietnamese and English political editorials. Although these studies share a similar focus on identifying and categorizing reference types as part of grammatical cohesion, they differ in terms of data sources and contexts. Therefore, this study aims to identify the types of references used in the fictional short story *The Little Match Girl* to determine the dominant reference types contributing to the text's cohesion.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to identify the reference devices used in the short story *The Little Match Girl* by Hans Christian Andersen, published in 1845. The story was selected for its popularity as a literary masterpiece that exemplifies moral and emotional storytelling and highlights themes of hope, innocence, and human compassion. It has inspired numerous adaptations and reinterpretations across various art forms and has frequently been used in education, religious reflection, and social campaigns.

Words, phrases, clauses, and sentences in the story were analyzed using Halliday and Hasan's (1976) model of cohesion. The aim was to identify the types and frequencies of references; therefore, the data are in the form of statistics and numerical counts. The data analysis consisted of several steps: (1) reading the story thoroughly, (2) identifying the reference devices, (3) classifying the references into three types, (4) presenting the data, and (5) interpreting the findings and drawing conclusions.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis, a peer checking technique was used. Two English lecturers with expertise in linguistics and literary analysis did the peer checking by reviewing the initial identification and classification of reference devices. They examined the coding categories and identified whether the interpretations aligned with the textual evidence. Their feedback helped refine the coding scheme and interpretation.

Result and Discussion

The analysis identified three major types of grammatical reference, with a total of 191 reference devices used throughout the story. All devices play crucial roles in the cohesion of the story. The frequencies and percentages of each reference type are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of Reference Types in The Little Match Girl

Reference Type	Frequency	Percentage
Personal	117	61
Demonstrative	66	35
Comparative	8	4

Table 1 shows that the most frequently used type of reference in the text is personal reference with the percentage of 61%, which is similar to the findings of Wakerkwa (2024) and Alamiri and Mickan (2016). The second most frequently used type is demonstrative reference, and the least used type is the comparative, accounting for only 4% from the total reference elements. The dominance of personal and demonstrative references demonstrates Andersen's preference for maintaining a cohesive narrative through consistent reference to characters and setting. However, this pattern differs

from Muhyidina et al. (2020), who observed a more balanced use of reference types in an Indonesian literary text. For a more comprehensive explanation, the words of each reference type are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency and Distribution of Referential Items in The Little Match Girl

Category	Type	Quantity	Percentage (%)
Personal	I/me	8	4
	my	4	2
	you	2	1
	your	1	0.5
	she	30	16
	her	37	20
	he	2	1
	his	1	0.5
	we	1	0.5
	they/them	10	5
	their	1	0.5
	it	16	8
	its	3	2
	one	1	0.5
Demonstrative	this	3	2
	that	2	1
	there	1	0.5
	the	60	31
Comparative	more	8	4

1. Personal Reference

The story follows a little girl's difficult life with abusive parents who force her to earn money by selling matches, and this narrative focus is reflected in the frequent use of personal reference. Personal reference involves the use of pronouns and possessive forms to identify participants within a text. Since the short story is narrated from a third-person point of view, centering the little girl as the protagonist, the pronouns 'she' and 'her' appear most prominently with a total of 67 occurrences throughout the story. It is used to maintain focus on the protagonist's experiences and emotions.

(1) 'Buy my matches!' she cries. But nobody buys any matches from her. No one gives her any money.

In this excerpt, *she* and *her* refer anaphorically to the little girl, the story's main character, introduced in the opening paragraph. The repeated use of these pronouns creates cohesion by avoiding unnecessary repetition of the noun phrase *the little girl*. This pattern supports Halliday and Hasan's (1976) claim that reference serves as a key mechanism of cohesion, helping readers reconstruct meaning across clauses and sentences.

(2) ... and a street boy takes the second shoe in his hands. 'When I'm older, my children can sleep in this little bed!' he laughs. Then he runs away with the shoe.

Here, *he* and *his* refer to the street boy introduced earlier in the same sentence. Their interpretation relies on anaphoric reference, where the pronouns point back to their antecedent within the same or preceding clause. This pattern demonstrates how Andersen maintains coherence within short narrative moments. As noted by Fang (2020), third-person pronouns typically function as cohesive devices that link participants within the text, keeping the narration focused yet impersonal.

- (3) **She** remembers **her** grandmother, and **the old woman**'s love for **her**.
- (4) Now she is sitting under the most beautiful Christmas tree. **It** is bigger and nicer than **the one** in **the window** of the old merchant's home last Christmas.

In example (3), *she* and *her* refer to the little girl, while *the old woman* functions as a lexical substitute for *grandmother* to avoid repetition and enrich the description. This is in line with Alamiri and Mickan's (2016) observation that varied referential forms create interconnected semantic ties. The pronoun *it* in (4) refers back to the *Christmas tree*, while *the one* refers to a specific object that exists outside the text and is not mentioned elsewhere in the story. The writer can infer the meaning of this object through contextual imagination. This type of reference is known as exophoric reference, in which the interpretation needs outward linking to an entity outside of the text (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

Although Halliday and Hasan (1976) argue that exophoric references do not contribute directly to the text's cohesion, they enhance situational coherence and realism. Through this interplay of endophoric and exophoric references, Andersen ensures that readers remain emotionally connected to both the textual world and the imagined experiences of the protagonist.

2. Demonstrative Reference

Demonstrative reference is the second most frequent type, with 35% of the total references. Demonstratives in the story are used to identify specific entities within the discourse or in the situational context, helping readers locate objects, people, and places in relation to one another.

- (2) ... and a street boy takes the second shoe in his hands. 'When I'm older, my children can sleep in **this** little bed!' he laughs. Then he runs away with **the** shoe.
- (5) Just then, the girl sees a little house near a bigger house in front of her ... she goes and sits **there** out of the wind.

The references *this* and *there* in excerpts (2) and (5) are demonstrative expressions that function as anaphoric references that identify specific objects and locations in the text. In excerpt (2), *this* refers to the shoe the boy has just taken from the little girl, indicating physical proximity. In (5), *there* points to the place where the little girl sits, guiding readers to visualize the spatial relationship between the girl and her surroundings. Andersen's use of nominal and adverbial demonstratives (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, as cited in Fang, 2020) maintains spatial coherence and supports smooth transitions between narrative events.

(6) 'Oh, Grandmother! It's you!' the child cries. 'Please don't go away when the match flame dies.'

The story continues on after sitting between the two houses, the little girl lights up a match and envisions her grandmother in the flame. Excerpt (6) has two demonstratives *the*. The phrase *the child* refers to the protagonist, the little match girl, while the phrase *the match flame* specifies the object of focus, the flame from the fire she created in which she sees the view of her deceased grandmother. These demonstratives contribute to the text's cohesion by linking new narrative elements with previously introduced ones.

3. Comparative Reference

Comparative reference occurs least frequently, accounting for only 4% of all reference devices. These references highlight similarities or differences between elements in the text and often carry a symbolic or emotional purpose.

(7) Now she is sitting under the most beautiful Christmas tree. It is bigger and nicer than the one in the window of the old merchant's home last Christmas.

The comparative expressions *bigger* and *nicer* represent comparative reference, connecting the present vision of the Christmas tree to a previously remembered one. Although the earlier tree is not described elsewhere in the text, its existence is implied through the phrase *the one in the window of the old merchant's home*. Here, the word *one* functions as a substitutive reference, avoiding repetition while maintaining cohesion. The comparison requires readers to interpret meaning both within the text and through contextual imagination. In this part, readers need to draw an imaginative line between the present reality in the story and the character's memory to understand the emotional significance of the comparison between the two moments.

(8) And all the matches make a big, yellow flame—lighter than the day.

Here, *lighter* serves as a comparative reference contrasting the brightness of the flame with daylight, an exophoric comparison that relies on readers' real-world knowledge. Through such a comparison, the author not only evokes imagery but also invites readers to sense the emotional shift between the girl's journey from darkness toward hope.

The low frequency of comparative references contrasts with Dang's (2020) observation of the frequent use of comparison in Vietnamese political editorials. This difference may result from differences in genre, purpose, and cultural context. While political editorials aim to persuade through evaluation and comparison, Andersen's fictional narratives use comparison more selectively to serve symbolic and emotional functions rather than argumentative ones.

Conclusion

The analysis finds that the frequent recurrence of personal pronouns such as 'she' and 'her' ensures participant continuity and emotional focus on the protagonist, while the pervasive use of demonstratives guides readers through the story's familiar settings

and events. Although relatively rare, comparative expressions such as 'bigger', 'nicer', and 'lighter' enrich the narrative by contrasting the little girl's miserable circumstances with her hopeful imaginations. Together, these reference types not only connect linguistic elements across the text but also reinforce the story's deeper themes of warmth, love, and transcendence. Thus, Andersen's cohesive choices contribute to the text's lasting emotional impact and exemplify how grammatical cohesion enhances literary meaning. This study contributes to literary discourse by illustrating how referential devices function in constructing unity and emotional meaning in a text. Further research is suggested to investigate the correlation between the dominance of reference types and factors such as the author's background, writing period, and text genre.

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