

## ***Human Reference***

Nirmalangshu Mukherji, University of Delhi  
Invited speaker

Most forms of language-use depend on our ability to use language to refer, even if we agree with Chomsky that the primary function of language is construction of ‘inner thought’ to enable humans to, say, plan ahead, thus giving selectional advantage to the species. This use of language will not have survival value if the human mind created mostly fictions. It is in the real connections with the world—reference—that our plans and goals have a chance. Are there mechanisms internal to the human language system that endow humans with a distinct form of referential ability?

The topic will be discussed with a focus on what philosophers call *Singular Thoughts* that enable a creature to pick out, identify, or otherwise refer to an individual object. There is no reason why a chimpanzee cannot have singular thoughts about its nest, the nearest pond, the currently preferred mate, etc. What is the general structure of those thoughts? I will argue that singular thoughts of chimpanzees can be explained without endowing these creatures with *Singular Terms* such as names, definite descriptions, and demonstrative phrases. The presence of singular terms in human language not only gives a uniquely human shape to human singular thoughts, it ensures that such thoughts are shared between conspecifics. The sound of singular terms is essential for human language, it is not ‘ancillary.’