Human impersonal pronouns in Afrikaans: a double questionnaire-based study

Daniël Van Olmen [a,*], Adri Breed [b]

[a] *Lancaster University, Department of Linguistics and English Language, County South C68, Bailrigg, Lancaster LA1 4YW, United Kingdom*
[b] *North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, Department of Afrikaans and Dutch, Building E9 – 243, Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom 2520, South Africa*

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This paper is the first in-depth study of the main human impersonal pronouns in Afrikaans: *jy* 'you', *('n) mens* '(a) human' and *hulle* 'they'. It adopts a double questionnaire approach, consisting of an acceptability judgment task for one group of participants and a completion task for another group. On the theoretical side, we test the different dimensions proposed in two of the most recent semantic maps of human impersonal pronouns. The first map features vague, inferred and specific existential uses, which vary in the kind/degree of (un-)knownness. The second one distinguishes existential contexts that only allow a plural interpretation from existential contexts that are neutral with respect to number. The results of our questionnaires indicate not only that the dimensions of number and (un)knownness involve gradual instead of categorical distinctions but also that they interact with one another, with decreasing acceptability and usage of *hulle* along both of them. More generally, the completion task data suggest that human impersonal pronouns are not the preferred strategy for impersonalization in existential contexts anyway. On the descriptive side, we show that Afrikaans has a division of labor between *('n) mens* and *jy* on the one hand and *hulle* on the other. The former are restricted to universal-internal uses, the latter to universal-external, speech act verb and existential ones. The data also reveal that speakers may consider the less grammaticalized form *'n mens* more acceptable but that they tend to employ more grammaticalized *mens*. It thus attests to the usefulness of combining the two types of questionnaire.

© 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The overall aim of the present paper is to provide an analysis of the functional potential and actual usage of the main human impersonal pronouns (henceforth HIPs) in Afrikaans. Such an undertaking requires us to first define the notion of HIP and examine the ongoing debate about impersonal uses in the literature. Section 1.1, the first part of this introduction, addresses these issues. It also needs to be shown why Afrikaans and certain HIPs in particular merit closer investigation, which is done in Section 1.2. Moreover, the study of the actual use of those HIPs calls for an understanding of impersonalization strategies in general. This issue is the topic of Section 1.3. In Section 1.4, finally, we sum up our research questions.

After the present introduction, we describe the double questionnaire approach adopted here as our methodology in Section 2. Section 3 present the results of the acceptability judgment task and Section 4 those of the completion task. These findings are discussed in more detail in Section 5. Section 6, lastly, is our conclusion.

---

* Corresponding author.
   E-mail addresses: d.vanolmen@lancaster.ac.uk (D. Van Olmen), adri.breed@nwu.ac.za (A. Breed).

1.1. Impersonal uses

The last decade has witnessed a growing interest in HIPs, which can be defined as the pronominal expression of impersonalization. Gast and van der Auwera (2013, p. 124) characterize this process as 'filling an argument position of a predicate with a variable ranging over sets of human participants without establishing a referential link to any entity from the universe of discourse'. *One* and *they* in (1) can serve as examples.[1] The HIP in (1a) functions as the subject of a sentence that makes a claim about a quasi-universal set of people. No reference is made to a particular (group of) individual(s) traveling to England. The HIP in (1b) does not refer to known human participants either. Yet, unlike in (1a), the existence of at least one specific person that stole the car is implied here. The speaker is just unable or unwilling to identify them in a more accurate way.

(1) a.   Eng   If **one** goes to England, it's best to take a raincoat.
     b.   Eng   **They** have stolen my car!

These two sentences represent a fundamental dichotomy established in the research into HIPs. *One* can be roughly paraphrased as 'anyone' or 'people' and *they* as 'someone' or 'some people'. Egerland (2003, pp. 75–76) terms the former interpretation 'generic' and the latter 'arbitrary'. In Giacalone Ramat and Sansò (2007, p. 106), they are described as 'human non-referential indefinite' and 'human referential indefinite' respectively. We will follow Gast and van der Auwera (2013, pp. 138–140), who call the use in (1a) 'universal' and the one in (1b) 'existential'.

Further and subtler distinctions have been proposed in two of the most recent semantic maps of HIPs. Siewierska and Papastathi's (2011, p. 604) map of third person plural HIPs, like *they* in (1a), is given in Fig. 1.
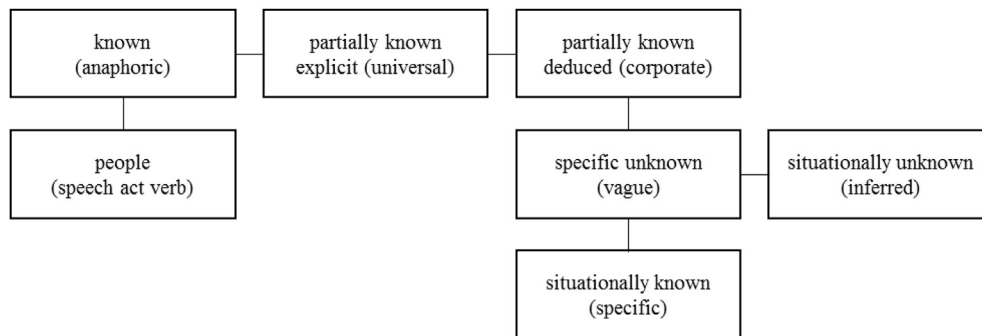

Fig. 1. Siewierska and Papastathi's (2011) map of third person plural HIPs.

Besides the personal or 'known (anaphoric)' use, Siewierska and Papastathi (2011) distinguish two so-called semi-impersonal ones, three truly impersonal ones and a speech act verb one. The semi-impersonal uses are exemplified in (2). In (2a), the group of individuals can be considered partially known because the sentence contains an explicit expression, i.e. *in Greece*, that helps identify the referents to some extent. The HIP is also universal in that it ranges over all human participants in Greece. In (2b), by contrast, *they* is employed existentially. It implies that there exists a particular set of people who have put up the speed cameras. They are still partly known, though. The reason is not some overt indication, like in (2a), but the predicate itself. We can deduce from it that they are a collective that has the right and/or power to install speed cameras. The police and the government are two likely candidates. This semi-impersonal existential use is typically called 'corporate' (a term that goes back to Pesetsky, 1996, p. 39).

(2) a.   Eng   In Greece, **they** drive quite unpredictably.
     b.   Eng   **They** have installed new speed cameras here.

The three uses that Siewierska and Papastathi (2011) regard as genuinely impersonal are illustrated in (1b) and (3). They differ in the type or level of (un)knownness, as argued by Cabredo Hofherr (2006) among others. In the 'vague' use in (1b), the set of human participants cannot be identified by the interlocutors but there is said to be at least one specific person who committed the known act of stealing the car. In (3a), the speaker gathers from the situation, i.e. the smell in the room, that the essentially unknown event of consuming pizza there must have occurred and that an unidentifiable (group of) eater(s) must have existed. This use is labeled 'inferred'. In the 'specific' use in (3b), the event takes place at a particular place and time and the interlocutors may thus have certain expectations about who is performing it. Despite the situational potential for identification, the (set of) individual(s) knocking on the door is not explicitly named, however.

(3) a.   Eng   **They** have eaten pizza in here. (I can smell it.)
     b.   Eng   **They** are knocking on the door. (It is your mother.)

---

[1] In the examples, Afr, Dut, Eng and Ger are short for Afrikaans, Dutch, English and German respectively.