



Functions of “you” in conference presentations



Francisco Javier Fernández Polo*

Departamento de Filología Inglesa e Alemá, Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, Avenida de Castelao s/n, 15762 Santiago de Compostela, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Keywords:

Conference presentations
Second person pronouns
Discourse functions
ELF
Politeness

ABSTRACT

The construction of a suitable image of the addressee is crucial for the success of academic communication. Unlike in writing, second person pronouns abound in academic and research speech. This paper studies the discourse functions of explicit you-mentions in conference presentations, trying to explain how they contribute to achieving speakers' goals. I also investigate possible differences between native and non-native speakers in the way they conceptualize audiences into their presentations. In general, speakers employ second-person pronouns to impart knowledge, secure shared interpretations, direct the audience's attention to visuals, and reinforce interpersonal links with the audience. Patterns of second-person pronoun use found in NNS presentations are sometimes reminiscent of pedagogic discourses, and show a mitigated use of second-person pronouns for specific functions like expressing positive politeness. However, they also show an enhanced sensitiveness towards the communicative needs of the audience, which translates into a greater awareness and readiness to exploit the communicative potential of the visual modes to ensure the audience's understanding.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Personal pronouns have been widely studied as an engagement feature in academic discourse. Traditionally, the main focus has been on research writing, particularly research articles (RAs) (Harwood, 2005; Hyland, 2001; Kuo, 1999). More recently, there has been significant research on pronoun use in spoken genres, including lectures (Cheng, 2012; Fortanet, 2004; Lee, 2009; Rounds, 1987; Yeo & Ting, 2014) and conference presentations (CPs) (Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005a,b; Webber, 2005), with some studies exploring the differences between speech and writing (Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005b). Research shows the existence of important differences both in the quantity and role of personal pronouns in academic speech and writing, in general, but also across genres and disciplines. Generally speaking, academic writing shows a clear preference for *we* over *I* and *you* (Hyland, 2001; Kuo, 1999). While the latter could convey a potentially offensive “stark detachment” (Hyland, 2001, p. 557) from readers, inclusive *we* can strategically show positive politeness towards them, by acknowledging – arguably, only cosmetically (Harwood, 2005) – their status as expert equals.

I and *you* feature much more prominently in university lectures (Fortanet, 2004; Okamura, 2009) and CPs (Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005a; Webber, 2005). For Cheng (2012) and Yeo and Ting (2014), the prevalence of *I* and *you* in lecture introductions and closings, respectively, reflects the “high level of interactivity” (Cheng, 2012, p. 243) of the genre. Students are explicitly addressed to elicit their prior knowledge, give instructions, make announcements, direct their attention or share

* Fax number: +34 881811818.

E-mail address: xabier.fernandez@usc.es.

personal experiences, as well as mentioned in examples and explanations of complex subject matter, to enhance involvement. Although Lee (2009) also finds *I* and *you* prevalent in lecture introductions, comparatively, *we* seems to occur rather more frequently in large lectures, arguably to narrow the greater distance between teachers and students. Interesting as these findings on classroom discourse may be, they are not extensible to other spoken research genres, in particular, the CP, with quite different discourse goals and participant relationships: asymmetrical in lectures and egalitarian in the expert-to-expert CP context.

Compared to lectures, there are few specific studies on pronoun use in CPs. CPs, like lectures, are delivered in real-time to live audiences, and personal pronouns play a much more prominent role than in writing, not only in expressing speaker involvement but also in creating rapport with listeners. Consequently, *I*, *we* and *you* have been found to occur far more frequently in CPs than in RAs (Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005b). In CPs, *I* can help presenters underline their responsibility in the research (Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005b; Webber, 2005), while inclusive-*we* can express deference towards the expert audience (Webber, 2005) by meeting “expectations of inclusion” (Hyland, 2001, p. 556). As for second-person pronouns, existing research generally underscores their frequency in CPs, where they play a number of genre-specific functions, including directing the audience’s attention to the screen, making information salient, emphasizing shared knowledge or involving audiences in knowledge construction (Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005a,b; Vassileva, 2002; Webber, 2005). Although valuable, these analyses still lack both depth and width. For instance, with the exception of Vassileva (2002), no attempt has been made to provide a complete functional taxonomy and no information is given on the comparative frequency of the different roles. More importantly, the existing role descriptions remain sketchy, resulting in rather fuzzy and overlapping categories (e.g., Vassileva’s *reference to handouts* and *reference to data*).

Interestingly, some of these studies adopt a contrastive approach, comparing pronoun use in English native speaker (NS) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) presentations (Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005a; Vassileva, 2002). Their results indicate a possible underuse of *you* in ELF CPs: “unlike their NS peers NNS do not seem intent on installing a feeling of connivance or empathy with their listeners” (Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005a, p. 51). This echoes traditional accounts of ELF as a limited instrument, focused on intelligibility but lacking in interaction (Firth, 1996). However, research has shown that ELF speakers may use language “for a range of purposes, including the projection of cultural identity, the promotion of solidarity, the sharing of humour” (Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011, p. 296) and, arguably in CPs, constructing an image of the audience which responds to the discourse community’s accepted practices and expectations.

This study provides a comprehensive description of the distribution and functions of audience-specific *you*, the “clearest acknowledgement” of the audience presence (Hyland, 2001, p. 557), in a corpus of CPs. Its main focus is on ELF, today, if only because of the sheer number of users, “a better representative than native English” of English as a conference language (Mauranen, Pérez-Llantada, & Swales, 2010, p. 640). Despite the boom in ELF research in the last ten years, including the increasing number of studies of spoken academic ELF driven by the ELFA corpus (Mauranen, Hynninen, & Ranta, 2010), ELF CPs still remain a considerably under researched area. The aim of the study is to show, using a corpus of NS presentations which is broadly comparable in terms of discipline, topic, speaker expertise, presentation style and audience (see section 2 below), the distinct ways in which ELF and NSs conceptualize audiences and interact with them. The following general research questions guided the investigation: 1) who are the actual referents of *you* in CPs?; 2) what roles are attributed to the audience through the use of explicit *you*?; and 3) what differences are there in the use of *you*-mentions by native and non-native English presenters?

2. Data and methods

As described in Table 1, the corpus for this study consists of 17 CPs, 12 by non-native speakers (NNSs) and 5 by native speakers (NSs), totaling circa 55,000 words. Only the monologic part of the presentations is included, as arguably the final discussion section would constitute a different genre (Räsänen, 2002). The discipline is linguistics, the area of specialization of the author, which facilitated both the collection and interpretation of data. Presentations were audio and videotaped at four international conferences in Spain and Portugal between 2007 and 2009, and transcribed verbatim by the author and one collaborator. Two were general conferences covering various theoretical and applied topics. The other two addressed issues on English for academic purposes and English language teaching. All presentations report empirical (i.e., data-based) research and both sub-corpora contain a similar proportion (8 out of 12 in the NNS, 3 out of 5 in the NS component) of quantitatively oriented research, focusing on numerical data in tables and graphs. All NNS presenters were English specialists, therefore highly competent in English, and slightly more experienced than the NSs. Four are co-presentations with more than one speaker, three in the NNS corpus and one in the NS group, a proportion probably similar to current practice in international conferences, making a total of 21 speakers. Spanish speakers clearly predominate in the NNS group, reflecting the geographical location of the conferences. All but one of the NSs are British, although half had been working in non-UK universities for a relatively long period.

The research data also include field notes on, among others, time and location of the presentations, and estimations of the size and nature of the audiences. Consonant with the international scope of the events, audiences were linguistically and culturally diverse, with NSs being a clear minority. All speakers used slide projecting facilities, with the sole exception of NNS11, who employed a paper hand-out.

AntConc (version 3.2.1w) was used to identify tokens of *you* and for lexical cluster analysis. To prevent double counting, I decided to exclude from the count instances of *your* and *yours*, as well as repetitions due to the natural constraints of speech

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6841035>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6841035>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)