

Introduction: The flexibility of pronoun reference in context



Personal pronouns are among the most frequently used elements in language. At first sight, they are tightly connected to the speech act roles of speaker (first person), addressee (second person), and other (third person). However, this one-to-one mapping between person and reference seems too rigid once we look at natural language use. Building on previous work in this direction, this special issue will show that the use and interpretation of pronouns is much more flexible and pragmatically driven than often assumed. Ultimately, the reference of a first person pronoun does not have to include the speaker (nursery *we*: *How are we doing today?*), while a second person pronoun can be used without referring to the addressee (as in *You saw an opportunity and then you scored*, said by a football player). Observations like these suggest that pronominal reference is more flexible than usually thought. In this special issue we wish to address the question what pragmatic principles regulate the flexible use and interpretation of pronouns. Can we identify the contexts in which pronouns get a non-prototypical interpretation, and can we account for cross-linguistic patterns of variation and change? Below we will briefly discuss the seven papers collected for this special issue and describe how they each contribute to answering these questions.

De Schepper makes a distinction between so-called *interlocutor phenomena* on the one hand, which he claims are the same cross-linguistically, and *person phenomena* on the other hand, which may differ across languages. A second person pronoun such as English *you* for example may be used to refer to the addressee exclusively or to the addressee and her husband in (1), but if Bob is not physically present, the use of the vocative *Alice and Bob* is not felicitous in (2):

- (1) My husband and I enjoyed ourselves; did you enjoy yourself/yourselves as well, Alice?
- (2) My husband and I enjoyed ourselves; did you enjoy yourselves as well, Alice and Bob?

While a vocative has restricted reference to addressees, this is not the case for a second person pronoun. De Schepper argues that person is a complex implementation of the three speech act roles of speaker, addressee and other, such that a group of addressees always behaves the same as a group of addressees and others. The vocative is an example of an interlocutor phenomenon. Interlocutor systems are speaker-only or addressee-only, and the vocative is an example of the second one.

Whereas second person pronouns such as English *you* are prototypically used to refer to the addressee, [Siewierska's \(2004\)](#) typological study on person marking reveals that it is cross-linguistically quite common for second person pronouns to have the possibility of generic reference. **Gast, Deringer, Haas & Rudolf** point out that in terms of reference the pronoun *you* in (3) below gets three different interpretations, dependent on the context:

- (3) You shouldn't drink and drive

The first interpretation is what they call the *personal* interpretation, in which *you* refers to the addressee exclusively. Second, *you* could be used in a *generalizing* way, thus applying to the addressee as well as to any other individual. Third, when said to (for example) a six-year-old child, *you* in (3) refers to a group of people that does not include the addressee. A specific example of the latter use of *you*, i.e., excluding the addressee, but which is not clearly generalizing, is when a speaker is telling a story about themselves. The types of reference apart from the *personal* use (exclusive reference to the addressee) can be called *impersonal* uses. Gast et al. argue for a unified analysis of personal and impersonal second person pronouns. They claim that all these uses establish a link to the addressee. When the addressee is not in the

reference set, *you* involves (an invitation to) simulation and the creation of empathy. Thus, even though the addressee is not necessarily referred to by an impersonal second person pronoun, they are still necessarily addressed by it.

De Hoop & Tarenskeen call the personal interpretation of a second person pronoun *deictic* and the impersonal interpretation *generic*. They find that although it is usually assumed that second person pronouns are typically deictic, in almost half of the cases *you* gets a generic interpretation in spoken Dutch. A further examination of the contexts in which the two readings of *you* arise in spoken Dutch reveals that in questions 88% of subject *you* gets a deictic reading, referring to the addressee, whereas in declarative sentences this is only 34%. Deictic *you* is typically used in interactive discourse, whereas generic *you* is more typically used in descriptive language, such as narratives. A second person pronoun, whether it gets a deictic or a generic reading, addresses the hearer or reader directly (via a mechanism of self-ascription, cf. [Wechsler, 2010](#)). This might explain why hearers and readers upon hearing or reading a second person pronoun identify more strongly with the narrator or the character than in case of a first or a third person pronoun story ([Brunyé et al., 2009, 2011](#); [Andeweg et al., 2013](#); [Sato and Bergen, 2013](#)). De Hoop & Tarenskeen assume that a second person pronoun gets interpreted via self-ascription *before* it shifts to a generic interpretation triggered by a certain linguistic context. While context thus serves to guide the addressee to the right interpretation, the second person pronoun initially receives the deictic reading, which refers to the addressee.

Helmbrecht also notes that the impersonal use of second person pronouns is common cross-linguistically. He points out that in German not only the familiar second person pronoun *du* '2SG.FAM' can be used impersonally, but the polite second person pronoun *Sie* '2SG.HON' as well:

- (4) Leckeren Käse kannst du in dem Laden da nicht finden
- (5) Leckeren Käse können Sie in dem Laden da nicht finden

Both sentences can be translated to English 'you can't find delicious cheese in that grocery store' and get an impersonal or generic interpretation. However, despite the uniform impersonal interpretation that the two singular pronouns get, the social relation between the speaker and the addressee is preserved, (5) indicating a more distant relationship between them than the familiar (4). Because an impersonal or generic second person pronoun does not actually *refer* to the addressee (as pointed out in [de Hoop and Tarenskeen, 2015](#)), the politeness distinction in (4)–(5) seems to involve *addressee politeness* rather than *referent politeness* (cf. [de Schepper, 2015](#), for a discussion of that distinction). This then would be supportive of [Gast et al.'s \(2015\)](#) uniform analysis of personal and impersonal uses of second person pronouns in terms of establishing a direct link to the addressee. Helmbrecht does not present a corpus study of the frequency and distribution of non-prototypical uses of personal pronouns (but see [de Hoop and Tarenskeen, 2015](#), for a start) but he presents a typological overview of non-prototypical uses of pronouns and describes their communicative motivations and effects. In addition, Helmbrecht investigates whether these non-prototypical uses have an effect on the diachronic development of pronouns. He concludes that this is indeed the case and that the development of non-prototypical uses of pronouns always follow the same pattern: a pronoun may acquire new person/number values only if these new category values are either more specific (with singular being more specific than plural) or higher in the person hierarchy (with first person being highest and third person lowest in the hierarchy).

While [Helmbrecht \(2015\)](#) focuses on non-prototypical uses of pronouns and the diachronic recurrent patterns of change, [Heine and Song \(2011\)](#) have argued that markers for personal deixis belong to the most conservative parts of grammar; they are diachronically stable. This especially holds for second person pronouns. [Aalberse and Stoop \(2015\)](#) also argue that the disappearance of a personal pronoun in its prototypical use is rare. Nonetheless, this is exactly what happened with the original second-person pronoun singular in English (*thou*) and Dutch (*du*): they have been replaced by other forms. Aalberse and Stoop hypothesize that this rare change in Dutch and English was caused by an exceptional combination of circumstances, involving both a 'change from above' (the introduction of a polite pronoun in the 13th century due to a focus on negative politeness) as well as a 'change from below' (the need for economical deflection in the 16th century created by circumstances of language contact). They show how their hypothesis leads to two testable predictions: (i) the loss of the familiar pronoun between the 13th and 16th century will be strongest in subjects; (ii) the introduction of the polite pronoun in the 13th century will be mostly found in formal text types. They corroborate their predictions with data from a corpus of 13th and 16th century Dutch texts, which show, amongst others, that the use of *du* changes drastically: whereas it is mostly used as a subject in the 13th century, it is mostly used as a non-subject (vocative, possessive, object) in the 16th century. The association of *du* with informal texts that was found in the 13th century prose texts was lost by the 16th century.

Another issue for which the context-dependency of pronouns is important is perspective taking, as in *narratives* (cf. [de Hoop and Hogeweg, 2014](#)). [Vis et al. \(2012\)](#) found that in journalistic prose, second person pronouns have become more frequent over the last half century; both in the reporter's text, and specifically within direct quotations of sources. In line of [de Hoop and Tarenskeen's \(2015\)](#) and [Gast et al.'s \(2015\)](#) interpretation, journalists, by using a second person pronoun, address their readers more directly and/or they generalize more frequently. In other words, pronouns play an important

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