Impersonal uses of the second person singular: A pragmatic analysis of generalization and empathy effects

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Abstract

Pronominal and verbal forms of the second person singular are canonically used with personal reference, i.e., as referring (exclusively) to the addressee. In what is often called 'impersonal' uses, the range of reference is broadened from the addressee to a more comprehensive set of referents, and sometimes the relevant sentences are not literally speaking true, as properties are attributed to the addressee which (s)he does not actually have. The question arises whether impersonally used forms of the second person singular constitute a grammatical category of their own, or whether they exhibit the same (underlying) semantics as canonical uses of the second person. On the basis of a dynamic-inferential view of communication, we argue for a unified analysis of personal and impersonal second person forms. Effects of generalization are claimed to emerge in sentences which are generalizing independently of the occurrence of a second person form. Uses of the second person that lead to truth-conditionally false sentences are claimed to involve (an invitation to) simulation and the creation of empathy. According to this analysis, impersonal uses of the second person establish a direct referential link to the addressee, just like personal uses, and their status as 'impersonal' is a function of sentential contexts and conversational conditions.

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1. Introduction

In 'canonical' or 'personal' uses of the second person singular, some expression refers exclusively to the addressee, or some claim is made exclusively about her.[1] Consider (1).[2]

(1) You are drunk.

While (1) does not of course imply that the addressee is the only drunk person in the world, it makes a claim about the addressee only. This is different in (2).

(2) You shouldn't drink and drive.

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[1] We will use masculine pronouns for speakers and feminine pronouns for addressees throughout the article.

[2] Sources are indicated in footnotes or, when taken from linguistic literature, in parentheses; for common examples like (1) and (2), which could occur anytime and anywhere, no source is indicated.

(2) has (at least) three interpretations: First, it can have a personal reading, with *you* referring to the addressee only (*Jane, you shouldn*'*t drink and drive, because you are a lousy driver when you are drunk*). Second, it could be used in a generalizing way, i.e., as applying to the addressee as well as any other individual. Finally, when said to a six-year-old child – e.g., when the speaker intends to explain why he is walking home instead of driving – the addressee would not *prima facie* be included in the set of referents over which a generalization is made. As Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1468) put it: ''[A] general statement involving non-referential *you* need not apply in fact to the addressee''. A further, attested example of this type, uttered by English football player Wayne Rooney when complaining about his role in the English national team in June 2009, is given in (3).

(3) As a forward you have to be selfish if you want to score goals.[3]

Such impersonal uses of the second person can also be found in sentences that are not obviously generalizing, for instance in a mini-genre that has been termed 'life drama' by Kitagawa and Lehrer (1990). In (4), the addressee is not just unlikely to be included in the range of reference of *you*, she is effectively *excluded*, as the speaker is telling a story about himself:

(4) You are in Egypt admiring the pyramids and feeling that you have really left your own world and time behind when suddenly you meet your next door neighbor from home. (Kitagawa and Lehrer, 1990:749)

We will use the following terminology: Examples of the type of (1), where a claim is made about the addressee only, will be called 'personal uses' of the second person. The type of example illustrated in (2)–(4) above is often subsumed under the terms 'generic' (e.g. Kamio, 2001), 'generalized' (e.g. Stirling and Manderson, 2011) or 'impersonal' (e.g. Kitagawa and Lehrer, 1990; Siewierska, 2011; van der Auwera et al., 2012; Gast and van der Auwera, 2013). We have chosen the latter term, as we use the deverbal adjective 'generalizing' for a clause-level property: Sentences such as in (2) and (3) are regarded as 'generalizing', while examples of the type of (1) and (4) are called 'episodic'.

Among the impersonal uses of the second person, we can furthermore distinguish between cases like (2) (in the addressee-inclusive reading), where a claim about the addressee is implied, and cases like (3) and (4), where the predication expressed does not literally hold of the addressee (addressee-exclusive). We will call the first case 'valid', and the second 'simulated', because the addressee is invited to engage in simulation, as we will argue. Moreover, we will distinguish two types of simulation, i.e., 'category simulation', where the addressee is invited to self-ascribe (individual-level) properties that she does not actually have, and 'participant simulation', where the addressee is invited to imagine herself in a situation in which she is not actually participating.

In our study we address the following questions:

- How do impersonal uses of the second person relate to the personal uses?
- Do impersonal uses represent a category of their own, or can they be analyzed assuming the same lexical content or grammatical function as is assumed for personal uses?

We argue that personal and impersonal uses of the second person are not distinguished at a lexical or grammatical level. The generalizing effect of impersonal forms is claimed to be triggered by the sentential context. Such forms of the second person do not *make* a sentence generalizing; they are just used in generalizing sentences. The simulation effects are argued to be a result of cooperative speech behavior. We assume a dynamic-inferential model of communication, according to which speech participants interpret utterances relative to (each other's) 'mental models' (cf. Craik, 1943, Johnson-Laird, 1980, 2004) and a 'common ground' (Clark and Schaefer, 1989), i.e., a 'public' model serving as the basis of a conversational exchange.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 elaborates on the distinction between personal, generalizing and simulated uses of the second person. Section 3 contains an outline of a dynamic-inferential model of communication such as is needed for the analysis of impersonal second person forms. Section 4 introduces the type of assertion which is claimed to be responsible for generalization effects of second person impersonals, *qua*-assertions, preparing the ground for our analysis presented in the subsequent sections. Section 5 contains an analysis of generalizing second person forms that are 'valid' in the sense introduced above, where the predication expressed can be taken to imply a claim about the addressee. Section 6 deals with simulated occurrences of the second person in generalizing sentences ('category simulation'), where no claim is literally made about the addressee. Section 7 provides an analysis of simulated

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[3] See for instance http://www.dailystar.co.uk/sport/football/83544/Now-I-get-greedy, accessed on 22.11.2014.