



# It's all about *you* in Dutch

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## Abstract

Although second person pronouns are typically thought of as referring to the addressee, we find that in almost half the cases the personal subject pronoun *je* 'you' gets a generic (impersonal) interpretation in the Spoken Dutch Corpus. A further examination of the contexts in which these two readings of *you* arise reveals that 66% receives a generic and 34% a deictic reading in declaratives, but only 12% of readings is generic, and 88% is deictic for questions. This frequency distribution verifies our hypothesis that deictic second person subjects are typically used in interactive discourse, whereas generic second person subjects are mostly used in descriptive language. We assume that second person pronouns get a deictic reading via self-ascription by the addressee (following Wechsler, 2010), but that this reading can be overruled in favor of a generic reading when a deictic reading does not fit the context. The mechanism of self-ascription upon hearing a second person pronoun can explain why the generic use of *you* seems to evoke a reading of empathy often reported in the literature (e.g., Malamud, 2012).

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## 1. Introduction

The popular hashtag *yolo*, an abbreviation for “you only live once”, is often used in tweets these days. The second person pronoun *you* in this expression gets a generic interpretation, as it does not directly refer to the addressee, but rather denotes people in general, including the speaker, that is, the person who wrote the tweet (van der Auwera et al., 2012; Gast et al., submitted for publication). This is interesting, as *you* is originally a second person pronoun. In this paper, we will discuss the generic use of the Dutch second person subject pronoun *je* 'you' in relation to its original, deictic meaning.

In the following section we will present the interpretive effects of using a second person pronoun for generic reference that have been reported in the literature. In particular, using a second person pronoun when it does not exclusively refer to the addressee is often taken as a strategy that induces the addressee to identify or empathize with the individuals generalized over (see also Gast et al., submitted for publication). In section 3 a corpus study is presented on the deictic and generic use of the second person subject pronoun *je* 'you' in spoken Dutch. We find that the two uses of *je* 'you' occur almost equally frequently in daily conversations. The question then arises how the two readings of *je* 'you' are obtained across contexts. Section 4 therefore presents a follow-up study that relates the two interpretations of *je* 'you' to two different contexts of use: declaratives and questions. It will be found that the distribution of the two types of reading for subject *je* 'you' differs significantly across the two sentence types. In section 5 we will present Wechsler's (2010) extension of the *de se theory* for first person pronouns to second person pronouns in order to explain the effect of evoking the addressee's empathy for the speaker's perspective. The conclusion is presented in section 6.

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## 2. Interpretive effects of the generic second person pronoun

The second person pronoun in Dutch can have the deictic and the generic reading, similar to English. At first sight, generic and deictic *je* ‘you’ are completely different in reference. Deictic *je* ‘you’ refers to the addressee only, whereas generic *je* ‘you’ denotes a subset of people, in which the speaker and addressee may be included. The denotation of generic pronouns is usually considered to be roughly equivalent to ‘people’, ‘everyone’, ‘someone’, or ‘the typical person’ (Moltmann, 2006). Generic pronouns in natural conversation do not usually denote all people in the world, but a subset thereof. Ramat and Sansò (2007) show that *man-elements*, impersonal pronouns derived from the noun meaning ‘man’, denote in the developmental stages ‘all human race’ or ‘mankind’. These elements grammaticalized into pronouns, e.g., *man* in German and *on* in French, that can denote more restricted, relevant subgroups of people. The Dutch *man-element*, *men*, is not used frequently anymore and sounds a bit archaic (Weerman, 2006). It has largely been replaced by the personal pronouns *je* ‘you’ and *ze* ‘they’, which are different from *men* in being ambiguous between their original interpretation and their more recently obtained impersonal meaning, as well as in their occurrence both as subject and object while *men* is typically restricted to the subject function. The tendency to replace impersonal pronouns by second person pronouns has not only been reported for Dutch, but also for other European languages, such as English (Los, 2002) and Danish (Jensen, 2009). Siewierska’s (2004) typological study on person reveals that it is cross-linguistically quite common for second person pronouns to have the possibility of generic reference. The generic use of Dutch *je* ‘you’ is nothing special, therefore.

It has been pointed out in the literature that generic (impersonal) pronouns, whether they are second or third person, have a special relation with the speaker. The following utterance, taken from the Spoken Dutch Corpus, can illustrate this.<sup>1</sup>

- (1) Want **je** zit toch wel ’s zo rond te  
 because you sit PART PART once.RED so round to  
 kijken als ze aan ’t werk zijn dan denk ik  
 look when they at the.RED work are then think I  
 goh ’t is eigenlijk wel leuk hè die kinderen zo  
 gee it.RED is actually PART nice huh these children so  
 “Because, every once in a while **you**’re looking around when they’re working and I start to think that it’s actually kind of nice, right, all those kids and all”

A deictic interpretation of *je* ‘you’ is contextually inappropriate here. However, the fact that the situation described here is very specific as well as the switch to the first person pronoun *ik* ‘I’ within the utterance might suggest that a generic interpretation is not appropriate either. Still, we argue that *je* ‘you’ in (1) is an instance of generic *je* ‘you’: although the content of the predicate should be attributed to the speaker rather than to people in general, the situation is *presented* as a generalization over people. The use of *je* ‘you’ instead of *ik* ‘I’ in (1) gives the utterance a flavor of generalization which is also understandable, as the speaker represents ‘the secondary school teacher’ in the interview. Likewise, the Swedish impersonal pronoun *man* can be used to refer to the speaker rather than to people in general. This is illustrated in (2), which was taken from a broadcast interview with a local worker on a factory being closed down (Ragnarsdóttir & Strömqvist, 2005:146, example (1)).

- (2) SP1 Och hur upplever du företags-ledning-en-s agerande?  
 and how experience you company’s-management-the-’s action  
 “And how do you feel about the board’s actions?”  
 SP2 Man blir besviken  
 one becomes disappointed  
 “One gets disappointed.”

This little dialog is strongly reminiscent of the generic use of the second person pronoun in (1): on the basis of contextual cues (the interviewer asks the addressee how he feels), we can infer that the interviewee is talking about himself. Dahl (2000) takes Swedish *man* as an *egophoric* expression. Moltmann (2006) argues that British *one* is a particularly speaker-oriented pronoun, as generalizations with *one* are usually based on a first person experience. Malamud (2006:118) points out that “[s]ince the speaker must have some grounds for uttering generalizations, the generalizations with *one* are often taken to be made on the basis of the speaker’s own experience”, arguing that this is a pragmatically-driven tendency.

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used in the glosses: ACC = accusative case; COMP = complementizer; DAT = dative case; DIM = diminutive; NOM = nominative case; PART = particle; PL = plural; RED = reduced.

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