A typology of non-prototypical uses of personal pronouns: synchrony and diachrony

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Abstract

Personal pronouns as referential means have been investigated in general and comparative linguistics mostly with regard to their normal, prototypical use, which usually confirms to the essential combinations of person and number features. This paper deals with a much less investigated topic in the realm of pronouns, the non-prototypical uses of personal pronouns. Non-prototypical uses of personal pronouns are discourse uses, in which the reference (set) of the pronoun deviates from its prototypical one. For instance, a first person plural pronoun can be used to refer to a second person singular in doctor–patient dialogs. Or, a second person singular pronoun can be used impersonally in many languages. Non-prototypical uses of personal pronouns are restricted to certain communicative situations and usually have some additional pragmatic effects. In the first part of the paper, a synchronic typology of the non-prototypical uses of personal pronouns is presented together with a short characterization of the communicative motivations and effects. Examples from a variety of mostly European languages will illustrate these uses. The second part of the paper examines the question whether these non-prototypical uses have an effect on the diachrony of personal pronouns. It will be argued that this is indeed the case and that these effects cannot be subsumed under the heading of grammaticalization. It will be hypothesized that personal pronouns may acquire new person/ number values historically only, if these new category values are semantically either more individuated (plural > singular) or higher on the person hierarchy (3 > 2 > 1), or both.
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1. Introduction[1]

1.1. Theoretical background

Personal pronouns are deictic expressions that refer to one or more individuals by means of identifying their role(s) in a speech act. As deictic expressions – designating person deixis – they presuppose a deictic center[2] which, in most cases, is identical to the actual speaker. The deictic center may be shifted to other participants in discourse, though. Since the

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[1] The following abbreviations are used: 1, 2, 3 = first, second, third person; SG = singular; PL = plural, DU = dual; INCL = inclusive; EXCL = exclusive; FAM = familiar; HON = honorific; M = masculine; FEM = feminine; NOM = nominative; ACC = accusative; DAT = dative; > = this symbol translates as 'used as' or 'changed to', e.g. 3PL > impersonal is to be understood as 'a grammatical 3PL pronoun is non-prototypically used with an impersonal meaning; in the context of an historical change, it means grammatical category value × changes to grammatical category value y in a specific form.

[2] *Origo* in Bühler's terms (cf. Bühler 1984[1934]).

Table 1
Reference sets of the most important person/number values (cf. Helmbrecht, 2004a).

person/ number values		referential sets		English examples	
1SG		$\{1\}$			I
2SG		$\{2\}$			you(SG)
3SG		$\{3\}$			$he/she/it$
1PL	INCL	$\{1+2_{1-n}\}$ $\{1+3_{1-n}\}$	$\{1+2_{1-n}\}$ $\{1+2_{1-n}+3_{1-n}\}$	we	Ø
	EXCL	$\{1+2_{1-n}+3_{1-n}\}$	$\{1+3_{1-n}\}$		Ø
	2PL	$\{2_{2-n}\}$ $\{2_{1-n}+3_{1-n}\}$			you(PL)
	3PL	$\{3_{2-n}\}$			$they$

speaker role changes in the flux of discourse, the reference of personal pronouns changes accordingly. With respect to this property they are also called shifters.[3]

The essential syntagmatic, distributional and paradigmatic properties of personal pronouns can be summarized as follows.

Formal properties:

i. Personal pronouns are referential expressions that replace a full NP; as such they may fill all argument slots of the predicate and may appear also in the periphery of a clause; a frequent grammatical category of personal pronouns is therefore case encoding the semantic/syntactic relation of the pronoun in the clause;
ii. They do not allow restrictive modifiers (since they are inherently referential);
iii. They occur variously as free words, clitics, and pronominal affixes; in the latter two cases they are also called bound pronouns;
iv. Personal pronouns are almost always members of a closed class of words or formatives in a language;
v. They are organized in paradigms; i.e. as members of a paradigm they stand in opposition to each other;

Functional properties:

i. The meanings of personal pronouns can be defined according to their position in a paradigm; meaning differences can be described by means of distinctive semantic features;
ii. The essential categories that define the meaning of personal pronouns are person and number;
iii. The category of person refers to the main participants of a speech act: there are essentially three person values, first person (speaker), second person (hearer/addressee), third person (a person not involved in the speech act, i.e. a non-speech act participant) (cf. Benveniste, 1956);
iv. The category of number has a different meaning with personal pronouns than with common nouns; with common nouns a category value such as plural indicates more than one instance or token of the class of entities designated by the noun; in personal pronouns, however, plural indicates, in addition, a plurality of types (cf. Cysouw, 2003). For instance, the 1PL pronoun we may refer to a group of third persons plus a first person, or we may refer to a group of third persons, a second person and a first person. Hence, plurality in personal pronouns indicates a plurality of speech act roles (types) and a plurality of instances (tokens of these types) at least for the first and second person categories. Third persons are more like common nouns in this respect;
v. The meaning of personal pronouns with regard to person and number can be defined in terms of referential sets, cf. Table 1. For instance, the 1PL person/number value in the left column may refer to various groups of individuals including one or more hearers and/or one or more third persons. The speaker belongs obligatorily to these various groups;
vi. Personal pronouns are inherently definite and specific; this is obvious for all singular pronouns but holds also for the plural pronouns. For instance, a 2SG pronoun you refers to the hearer/addressee of the speech act, which is given by means of the shared perception of the speech act situation. A 1PL pronoun we refers to a group of individuals including the speaker, and this speaker group is either given by the speech act context or was introduced in the preceding discourse;
vii. There are of course other grammatical categories such as gender or class distinctions, kinship relations, politeness distinction, and some others that can be found in personal pronouns (see Mühlhäusler and Harré, 1990, or Helmbrecht, 2004b for extensive surveys on this).

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[3] The term $shifters$ was coined by Jakobson (1971[1957]).