THE PRAGMATIC DIMENSION OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to state that personal pronouns, which belong to the realm of interpersonal relations, do not cover grammatical categories only. It has always been claimed that personal pronouns are spatio-temporal indicators of discourse and that, therefore, they play an important role in the identification of the participants within the communicative act. However, these pronouns do not only have a minimal descriptive value; they are neither mere deictic indicators of their referents, nor linguistic elements that support just grammatical categories such as gender, person or number. On the contrary they are capable of covering, as it is often mentioned in several functional linguistic approaches, extralinguistic categories like politeness, respect, intimacy, solidarity, all of them social, pragmatic components. This amendment in the definition of personal pronouns could account for various pronominal occurrences in a text where the alternation pronouns-noun phrases is not based on substitution or other syntactic processes such as pronominalization.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es establecer que los pronombres personales, perte-
necientes al dominio de las relaciones interpersonales, no sólo cubren categorí-
as gramaticales como el género, la persona o el número. Tradicionalmente se los
ha denominado indicadores espacio-temporales del discurso, desempeñando en
éste un papel importante en la identificación de los participantes del acto comu-
nicativo. Sin embargo, no sólo tienen un valor descriptivo mínimo, ni son tam-
poco meros indicadores deícticos de sus referentes. Por el contrario, son capa-
ces de cubrir, como se menciona a menudo en varios enfoques lingüísticos
funcionales, categorías extralingüísticas como la cortesía, el respeto, la intimi-
dad o la solidaridad, todos ellos componentes pragmáticos, sociales. Esta modi-
ficación o extensión de la definición de los pronombres personales podría expli-
car varias ocurrencias pronominales en textos donde la alternancia
pronombres-sintagmas nominales no esté basada en la sustitución o en otros
procesos sintácticos como la pronominalización.

In this paper we are faced with personal pronouns as elements of the
linguistic system that instantiate one of the many cases where the
former traditional clear-cut division between what was proper lin-
guistics and what was considered extralinguistic no longer appears
to be so transparent or easily recognized. This is not a comprehensi-
ve review, and the different approaches presented here only serve the
purpose of being illustrative in our explanation.

Let us have a look at different types of linguistic studies,
namely, Transformational Grammar, Functional Grammar, and a
well-known article by Bolinger —«Pronouns in Discourse»— dated
1979, which can be subsumed under what has been called Functional
Sentence Perspective and that we have decided to include here as a
relatively early example of pronominal analysis within discourse stu-
dies.

TRANSFORMATIONAL GRAMMAR

In this review of the treatment of personal pronouns and phenome-
na like pronominalization and coreference, some conflicts are found
that derive obviously from the perspective adopted by each theoreti-
cal framework. Thus, the first thing that is worth mentioning is the
outstanding rigid formalization of transformational grammar with
respect to the three types of noun phrases: anaphors -where reflexi-
ve pronouns, reciprocal pronouns and noun phrase traces are inclu-
ded- pronominals, and lexical noun phrases, the latter also called
referential expressions. This rigid formalization implies that genera-
tive grammar regards the sentence level as its prevailing domain,
and, therefore, rejects the context. In contrast to both functional
and discourse approaches, the recent studies of transformational
grammar, that is, government and binding theory, deal with prono-
minals from an openly syntactic point of view, which determines
whether the three types of nominal groups aforementioned can or
cannot be coreferential with an intrasentential antecedent.

       The pronominals most frequently cited in recent transforma-
tional literature are possessive pronouns and personal pronouns. In
this paper we will only focus on the latter.

       All the aforementioned noun phrases must fulfil certain bin-
ding conditions whereby certain elements of a sentence are for-
mally related or bound. In the case of pronominals, they must be
free in their governing category, which means that a pronoun inclu-
ded in a clause or a noun phrase cannot be controlled or refer to an
antecedent within such syntactic domains[1]. The government and
binding theory considers the semantic component —the correct
interpretation of sentences— as dependent on syntax and the bin-
ding conditions between sentential constituents. The referential
aspect of pronominals and anaphors is dealt with from a syntactic
perspective in which the structural properties established between
them and their antecedents determine whether they share the same

reference or not. The structural hierarchy is, thus, of vital impor-
tance[2].

The transformational grammar is not concerned with the
exophoric reference either, that is, the deictic reference to the outer
world, since this would imply that in sentence analysis the extralin-
guistic factors are also important, not to say decisive in some cases.
Such an approach would logically be impossible in a syntax-oriented
grammar, where the syntactic module is regarded as independent of
the speaker's other cognitive modules. We will comment later on
other types of survey, like Bolinger (1979) and Thavenius (1983),
where the speaker's choice conditions the form of the sentence,
thus limiting the semantic interpretations to his/her intentions. In
this way, the structure of the outer world would determine first the
semantic structure and then the syntactic patterns. This reasoning
deviates from the generativist idea of clauses and noun phrases as
the only domains for pronominals, as it expands these domains to
the realm of longer text spans, with the possibility of having a rela-
tionship that holds between a pronominal and a whole paragraph as
its antecedent.

FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR

In contrast to this superiority of syntax and the structural proper-
ties, Functional Grammar —and by Functional Grammar we mean
here the one described by Simon Dik and the Dutch school— analy-
zes language not for the sake of language itself, but as a means to
explain the sentences of a linguistic system taking into account the
functions that we speakers want our utterances to reflect. If langua-
ge is a vehicle through which speakers convey particular intentions
or express attitudes in particular contexts, excessively formalised
theories that pay no attention to this big complexity involved in ver-
bal interaction would come close to being meaningless for functio-

nalists. Such complexity interacts with other external, social factors that have traditionally not belonged to language properly speaking, but to other realms, like psychology or social interaction.

In the case of Functional Grammar, the approach focuses on the rules which govern verbal interaction, seen as a form of co-operative activity between speaker and addressee, and also on the syntactic, semantic and phonological rules which govern the linguistic expressions that are used as instruments of this activity. Thus, predicates are taken to be the basic elements of a predication; they are listed in the lexicon of the language in the form of a predicative frame, and they are specified for the number of arguments they take (agent, goal, recipient, etc.). From these predicate frames, nuclear predications are formed by inserting appropriate terms into the argument positions. Full predications are formed from nuclear predications through the use of satellites like manner, locative and some others. Syntactic functions, which are interpreted semantically, and pragmatic functions are then assigned to elements of predication, and they are expressed in sentences through the use of expression rules, and here matters like cases, agreement, order or intonation play their role.

By predicates, functional scholars mean all lexical items of a language, and different categories are distinguished according to their different formal and functional properties. Then we have at least verbal, adjectival, and nominal predicates. All the predicates and terms from which predications can be construed are contained within the lexicon of the language. Here we come to an important point in our lecture, the terms, for personal pronouns in Functional Grammar are labelled basic terms. This accounts for the fact that in Functional Grammar a phenomenon like pronominalization is not considered as a transformation or change in syntactic structure, and when Dik mentions underlying predications in generative grammar[3], everything seems to point to pronouns as elements that appear in derived structures in that formal approach. By terms, they mean all linguistic

expressions which can be used to refer to entities in some world. Functional studies regard reference as both a pragmatic and a cooperative act which allows the speakers to «rescue» the concepts that allude to those objects of reality they are talking about.

PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN FG

In Dik (1989)[4] we can find already the special properties that distinguish personal pronouns from the other types of terms. Their characteristics are the following:

i) they have a minimum of descriptive value, which makes them be almost simple deictic indicators of their referents. There is no mention at this point of their anaphoric or text deixis, but bearing in mind precisely what is intended when text deixis is used in this and other frameworks, we may assume that the functional paradigm subsumes both exophoric and endophoric reference under the expression *deictic indicators*.

ii) They are a closed class in comparison to other terms of the lexicon.

iii) Their description can be made according to a few basic distinctions, among which the feature Person is always present. Thus, the first person is characterized by the feature [+ Speaker], the second person by [+ Addressee], and the third person by both [- Speaker] [- Addressee], the so-called non-participant. Inclusive and exclusive uses of the first and second person plural will combine these features in several ways. Other distinctions that define them are Number, Gender, Case, that is, grammatical categories, or, for example, Politeness or degrees of politeness. In the latter case we are concerned with other sorts of categories that I will try to explain briefly later.

The criteria used by this functional theory to account for these properties of personal pronouns lie in various assumptions. In

the first place these pronominal elements are, as we mentioned before, basic terms, and not the result of any derivation; and secondly, they can be represented in the form of term structures where the features [Speaker], [Addressee], or their absence function as abstract predicates operating over the term variable. As basic terms, the information of personal pronouns contained in the lexicon is likely to include their abstract analysis and their own real forms as well. The reason is that this abstract information is necessary for the expression rules to reflect on the linguistic expressions things like the agreement between a predicate and its subject. With respect to those relationships between terms and predicates which involve the use of grammatical persons together with pronouns, an explanatory description is found of the relation that holds between the argument subject and the verbal predicate in full predications in *pro-drop* languages, languages in which the subject pronouns may be dropped from the sentence because of verbal morphology. In *pro-drop* languages, where the morphology of the verb often makes it unnecessary to realize the pronoun phonologically —and we say often because what follows does not logically apply to third person verb forms where the gender is not specified— the pronominal argument subject is assigned the pragmatic function **Focus** when it is made explicit, and emphasis then falls on the pronoun. For the first and second persons, as will be commented later, there will be an only referent the minute the pronoun functions as referential element in a particular utterance.

At the beginning of this paper we mentioned a study made by Bolinger —«Pronouns in discourse»— which places pronominal elements together with other text constituents which either explain text phenomena such as connections established between its components or help to make up the text itself. The American scholar states from the very beginning that the key to pronominalization is not to be found in syntax, and probably there is no such key. Throughout his research Bolinger demonstrates how referential problems

between noun and pronoun, problems of coreferentiality, although limited by structural, syntactic, issues, can be solved when the sentence is provided with a linguistic context, namely, when the textual and pragmatic conditions trigger mechanisms that clearly establish the referents for the speakers. Concepts like information already known and familiarity allow the so-called pronominalization to the left. This type of pronominalization shows how a pronoun can be coindexed, that is, can share the same reference, with a noun that appears later in the text, in a cataphoric relationship. Strictly formal syntactic methods cannot explain this, since referential identity between noun and pronoun would be impossible for such methods under these circumstances. Likewise, the idea of *vicinity*, which licenses the pronoun to co-refer with a text constituent that can also be situated two clauses earlier, would be unthinkable for that kind of method. As opposed to transformational grammar and functional grammar, which were not deeply interested in the reasons why a noun was substituted for a pronoun, Bolinger does take an active interest in the causes whereby the speaker decides in a particular position of the text to employ a noun for the second time or replace it by means of a pronoun, a nominal element with less semantic content. To resolve this, he considers that the linguist must pay attention to the different contexts and situations, and equally important are the meanings of the constituents or constituent groups in every linguistic utterance. Bolinger, like Thavenius (1983), think that in the course of verbal interaction both speaker and addressee are capable of presenting pronouns that have no explicit antecedents provided they are easily recovered at that point of conversation, either because of their general knowledge of the world, or because they share particular knowledge that make the referents be near in previous discourse whether explicit or implicitly. This linguist also agrees that in a noun-pronoun correlation, the latter, if replacing the former in the thread of discourse, is unmarked. On the contrary, a second occurrence of the noun would result in an emphatic use, a

proof that makes it evident for us that something more is intended than simply rescue the referent, for example, stress its nature. In examples like the Spanish expressions *el menda/la menda,* preceded by the first person singular pronoun *yo,* the sentence in which they are inserted may have a derogatory or a positive meaning depending on contextual and pragmatic causes. It is not difficult to imagine a particular context where the speaker that utters the discourse chain *yo ... el menda/la menda* regards themselves as someone that has a quality in an almost superlative degree, excessive subjective appreciation of himself or herself. However, in sentences like *Yo... el/la que les habla tiene la voluntad de asumir dicha tarea con efectividad,* we can notice, for example in political discourse, a certain degree of detachment or of lesser commitment to his or her own words. The choice of noun phrases in the discourse, in contrast to a reiterated use of pronoun forms, obeys, or may obey, to communicative intentions of the speaker that sometimes are not covered semantically by the pronominal. They do, nevertheless, on some occasions, and so the Canarian dialect makes profuse use of subject pronouns, and this sometimes —when repeated insistently— turns to be a marked use that may result in a kind of aggressive attitude for other Spanish speakers. As we can see, there are several cases which require different interpretations, and to try to systematise them all is a hard task, one that, if possible, would certainly be beyond our aims.

PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

Before we attempt to plunge into more uses of personal pronouns that can be added at this pragmatic, situational level, it would certainly prove useful at this moment to include some brief definitions of the very term *pragmatics.* The literature written on this topic so far is too huge to be presented here, and so we have decided to borrow only a few of these definitions from different sources, such

as dictionaries of linguistics and more exhaustive works like Levin-son's well-known work *Pragmatics* (1983). Thus, Lewandowski (1982) defines *pragmalinguistics* as that linguistic model concerned with performances or specific utterances of speech, and he associa-tes it with sociologically-oriented research interested in studying linguistic expressions mainly as consequence of situational cases, that is, psychological and social factors[5]. Crystal (1991) describes *pragmatics* as

> the study of language from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication. The field focuses on an 'area' between semantics, sociolinguistics, and extralinguistic context; but the boundaries with these other domains are as yet incapable of pre-cise definition. [...] In a narrow linguistic view, pragmatics deals only with those aspects of context which are formally encoded in the struc-ture of a language; they would be part of a user's pragmatic competence. [...] Sociopragmatics, by contrast, studies the way conditions on lan-guage use derive from the social situation[6].

Levinson (1983), in his search for a right definition of the term we are dealing with, tackles several different issues in an attempt to cover diverse areas that are directly or indirectly related to this discipline. In this way, he makes statements which range from simple clauses like «pragmatics is the study of language usage[7] » to more complicated expanded descriptions in which pragmatics is considered the study of those relationships between language and context which are encoded or grammaticalized in the structure of a language[8]. This entails the study of deixis, including phenomena like honorifics and others which are similar. Thus, pragmatic studies of the English language would have relatively little to say about social condition apart from the description of appropriate contexts for expressions like *sir, your honour* and the like. Pragmatic studies of Japanese, by contrast, would take an active part in the grammaticali-zation of social status or rank in relation to the participants and

other referents. In Spanish and French the concepts 'intimacy' or 'familiarity', expressed through *tú* and *tu* respectively, have become a contextually grammaticalized feature in the history of the two languages.

Levinson eventually defines *pragmatics* extensionally as the study of implicature, presupposition, speech acts, various aspects of discourse structure, and deixis, the latter at least partially, for it is the most obvious way in which the relationship between language and context reflects on the language structures themselves[9].

So far our interest has focused on which grammatical categories can be covered by personal pronouns, how these pronouns have correspondingly been featured in opposed theoretical frameworks, and how frequent is to spot uses of these pronominals which cannot be explained in terms of what is, or has for long been, strictly linguistic. Now we would like to concern ourselves with other categories that can be subsumed under the pragmatic and social components. At this point a two-fold distinction can be drawn between a pragmatically-oriented study of pronominal usage and a sociolinguistically-oriented study. Although difficult to establish because of their close interrelationships, a simple operative division would regard the sociolinguistic dimension as the one encoding within the pronoun systems phenomena which take place in social structures. The Japanese first person pronoun *kimi* is an instance of this. This pronominal is only used by men in close, intimate contexts, but only with other men. Women are not allowed to make use of it, among other reasons because the degree of intimacy among men could not be equated with the degree of intimacy among women. It is not, therefore, a problem of gender, but a question of factors that intervene in the communicative act.

On the other hand, the pragmatic dimension would have as its main concern the performance in discourse of concepts like 'politeness', 'intimacy', 'solidarity' and others. Some of these concepts frequently appear in political discourse, or in other types of discourse

in which we can find relevant elements subject to being analyzed similarly, that is, participants, participant roles, discourse topics, speaker's degree of involvement towards those topics, commitment to their own words, etc.

Honorifics, terms referring to syntactic or morphological distinctions used to express levels of politeness or respect among participants of verbal interaction, combine the two dimensions mentioned above. The pragmatic component deals with their meaning, that is, it tells us, for example, that the Spanish *Usted* signals that the addressee is either not familiar for the speaker or superior in social status, age, etc., whereas the sociolinguistic component is responsible for the description as to when we should use the honorific. In brief, we dare say that sociolinguistics is, in a way, covered by the term pragmatics, since the latter can be widely interpreted as the study of the contribution of the context to language understanding.

PRAGMATIC DIMENSION OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS

The notion 'pronoun' has been defined in all languages as though it were one single expressive category that could be applied to different pronominals in the same way, no matter whether they are personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns or possessive pronouns. Benveniste (1966) expounds, however, that the diversity of pronouns is not only formal, but that there also exist functional differences, and to this end he uses personal pronouns as a clear example. We can check in this type of pronoun that their nature will differ depending on the language mode employed. There will be some included as belonging to the syntax of the language, and others will be characteristic of what the author calls *discourse instances*, every single act whereby language is performed by speakers at the moment of their utterances[10]. According to Benveniste, first and second person pronouns are more context-bound than the third person pro-

noun; these pronominals that are dependent on the context had been labelled *shifters* both by Jespersen (1923) and by Jakobson three decades later.

Benveniste says that the utterances where the first and second person pronouns appear are characteristic of the level of language called pragmatic, that which contains not only linguistic signs but also the individuals that use them. The French linguist, who published his *Problèmes de Linguistique Générale* in 1966, was already in harmony with the pragmatic studies carried out in the last few decades, especially with respect to everything that is directly or indirectly related to the spatio-temporal coordinates of the communicative situation. Thus, what makes full noun phrases differ from pronouns like *I* in a referential process is that whereas the former denote a constant notion at all times, always recoverable in the same way in every occurrence, the first person singular pronoun has never the same referent for obvious reasons. The only existence or reality of *I* is defined in speech acts, and therefore in locutionary terms. Bearing this is mind, Benveniste describes *I* as the individual that utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *I*. Lyons (1977) shares the same view:

> It must not be thought, however, that the meaning of *I* and *you* is accounted for by saying that *I* means 'the one who is (now) speaking', and that *you* means 'the one who is being addressed'. In so far as *the speaker* and *the hearer* are substitutable for *I* and *you* in ordinary English, they are conventionalized pseudo-descriptions which (like *the author* and *your lordship*) depend for their interpretation upon our intuitive understanding of how person-deixis operates. [...] In other words, if *the speaker* is to serve as the equivalent of *I* in *The speaker is hungry*, the proposition that is expressed must be understood to be not just *The person who is speaking is hungry*, but *The person who is uttering this very utterance is hungry*[11].

First and second person plural pronouns admit exclusive and inclusive uses in their reference, which means in the case of *we* or *nosotros* that the addressed person or persons is or are part of the

reference of the pronoun in the inclusive use, in contrast to the exclusive use, where only the speaker and the third person or persons are the intended referents. In Amerindian and Australian languages, as in Manchu or Tibetan, the two uses of the first person plural pronoun are formally distinguished through two pronominals. In Indoeuropean languages, however, these two uses are contained within a single word-form. Thus, in *we* or *nosotros*, for example, the plurality of the verb form is not a union of elements that can be defined clearly, and what is evident is the prominence of the first person singular pronoun *I* or *yo* to such an extent that the plural pronoun can be used with a singular meaning. For Benveniste, this peculiar use of the plural pronoun is not the multiplication of the first person singular, but a form that is beyond the category 'person' itself, a form that implies extension of the first person but without drawing clear-cut limits. All this explains the usage of the first person plural pronoun as 1) a more «important» person, of higher rank, solemn and less defined, the so-called «Royal *we*» or *«plural mayestático»*; and 2) *I* or *yo* turns into a more diffuse, softened expression, the one used frequently by speakers in public speeches or by authors of papers before their audience (I myself serve as an example in this paper). Does this second use just mentioned obey to detachment of the self towards what they say, or, on the contrary, to strong commitment towards their words in an attempt to persuade the audience? This could certainly be the starting point of another paper, certainly interesting.

Recent appearances in periodicals like «Journal of Pragmatics» of more pragmatic studies of personal pronouns reinforce the interest shown with respect to the close association of these pronominals with what was in former times the exclusive field of the extralinguistic. Among those papers we can cite De Fina (1994) or Zupnik (1994). De Fina's article presents an empirical analysis of the pragmatic role that pronouns expressing person deixis have in two specific speeches that belong to political discourse. She argues that

pronominal choice in political discourse reflects differences in the way in which speakers present themselves with respect to other individuals and groups, and in relation to the situation discussed. Among other things she reanalyzes the concept of speaker involvement and also explores the possibilities personal pronouns have to convey solidarity. As for Zupnik, she tries to fill in the gap left by previous research into the persuasive functions of first person plural deictic pronominals that had not been able to explain the complex pragmatic process involved in the resolution of such pronouns and the consequent effect of such complexity on the persuasive functions of indexicals. She further demonstrates that speaker's power of persuasion is greatly determined by an ability to shift in and out of various roles within and across 'discourse spaces'.

Further studies of personal or other types of pronouns aim at discovering how problems of agreement with formally singular epicene antecedents are resolved by speakers, and here we can mention Newman (1992) with an interesting insight into issues like gender-biased or sexist attitudes to language among others, or Smith (1992), who mentions pronouns and imperative forms of verbs as part of the Japanese female speech called *keigo*, honorific language from wife to husband, from junior to senior generations, and so forth, but as we said before, this would be material for another paper.

NOTES

1   For more information about the three types of noun phrases, cf. DEMONTE, V.: *Teoría Sintáctica: de las Estructuras a la Rección*, Madrid, Síntesis, 1989, pp. 178-180.

2   For a full account of structural hierarchy in this sense see Reinhart's notion of *c-command*, which we are not going to include here, for it goes beyond our aim in this paper. REINHART, Tanya: *Anaphora and Semantic Interpretation*, London, Croom Helm, 1983, pp. 41-43.

3 Cf. DIK, S.: *The Theory of Functional Grammar. Part I: The Structure of the Clause*, Functional Grammar Series 9, Dordrecht, Foris, 1989, pp. 17-21.

4 Cf. DIK, S.: *op. cit.*, pp. 130-131.

5 Cf. LEWANDOWSKI, T.: *Diccionario de Lingüística*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1982, p. 268.

6 Cf. CRYSTAL, D.: *Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics, 3rd edition*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991, p. 271.

7 Cf. LEVINSON, S. C.: *Pragmatics*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1983, p.5.

8 Cf. LEVINSON, S. C.: *op. cit.*, p. 9.

9 Cf. LEVINSON, S. C.: *op. cit.*, p. 27.

10 Cf. BENVENISTE, E.: *Problèmes de Linguistique Générale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966.

11 Cf. LYONS, J.: *Semantics*, Vol. 2, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1977, pp. 645-646.

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