You could say that: the generic second-person pronoun in modern English

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An examination of a function of the second person pronoun frequently forgotten in pedagogical grammars of English.

Introduction

A lawyer friend told me the following story about a court case in Hong Kong that he had taken part in. His client was in the witness box and was answering questions in Cantonese while an interpreter relayed his words in English to a judge who was not Chinese. At one point the opposing counsel put a point that was detrimental to the client's case and asked if he agreed with it. The translation of the reply was 'you could say that', which was understood by the court as indicating agreement. Of course, what he actually meant was '***you*** (the counsel) could say that' (i.e. 'not me'), but it was understood as 'you (people in general) ***could*** say that' (i.e. 'it is acceptable to say that'). In standard spoken English stress (as shown by the bold type above) and weak forms would normally disambiguate, but it seems the interpreter (a native speaker of Cantonese) gave each word equal stress, thus allowing for the unintended interpretation. I am pleased to report that this misunderstanding had no bearing on the outcome of the case, which was won by my friend's client.

This incident neatly highlights the distinction (and potential for confusion) between two uses of *you*: the specific and the generic. The former refers to the addressee while the latter refers to people in general. Of the two it is the former that receives almost all the attention in grammatical descriptions, yet there is evidence that the latter is common in modern English. Indeed, once I had decided to write an article on this topic I began to notice examples of it in everything I read; some examples are given below. So this article is an attempt to redress the balance by investigating the nature and frequency of this use and its coverage in pedagogic materials.

Generic *you* in modern English

In fact, the issue of generic pronouns does not only concern *you*. Wales (1996) points out that all plural personal pronouns in English can have generic reference, a fact that is largely ignored:

> Although the so-called 'indefinite' or generic' uses of the pronouns we and you as well as they are exceedingly common in speech…, they tend to be but briefly described or, more surprisingly, not mentioned at all by grammarians. (1996:45)

Wales further claims that the generic/specific distinction is crucial to an understanding of personal pronouns in English, more so than the traditional paradigm built around number and person would suggest. In fact, the generic use of *we* has attracted a lot of attention in the last



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20 years in critical discourse analysis because of its ideological implications (e.g. Fairclough, 1989, Pennycook, 1994, Flowerdew, 1996, 1997), but not so that of *you*.

In the accounts that I examined the second person pronoun in English is unfailingly introduced as referring to the addressee(s) in discourse. However, it has long been known that it can also function as informal equivalent of *one* to refer to people in general. Dictionaries for native speakers and learners, as well as scientific grammars (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985, Biber et al., 1999, Huddleston and Pullum, 2002) account for it, though not at great length (cf. Wales' quote). The first edition of the *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* (1987) gives the following example:

1 It's awful when you can't remember someone's name. (my underlining)

Indeed, this use is of some vintage. According to the OED it is first attested in 1577.

It is not always easy to distinguish the two uses and there may be cases of ambiguity. Wales (1996:79) gives this example:

2 A: Friends can be two-faced.
B: What do you mean?
A: The way they talk about you.
B: Me?
A: No, me!

The mistaken interpretation of *you* as specific on the third line may have been influenced by its obviously specific nature on the second.

There are two important issues to examine in order to understand the nature of generic *you*: informality, and scope of reference.

Informality

In line with other accounts, Quirk et al. mention generic *you* as 'typically an informal equivalent of *one*':

3 You/One can always tell what she's thinking. (1985:354)

More recently Biber et al. have noted its use in both speech and writing (1999:330), while in comparison *one* is 'virtually restricted to the written registers' (1999:331). Wales, on the other hand, states that *one* 'has come to feature extensively in colloquial educated speech' and she cites examples where *one* and *you* co-occur 'where no real shifts of formality can explain it' (1996:81), giving this example:

4 I don't feel that one can ever be a therapist to somebody that you are closely involved with emotionally

Wales suggests that speakers use *you* to avoid repeating *one* and appearing pretentious. This phenomenon also appeared in the corpus used below.

Whatever the status of *one*, it would seem inappropriate to characterise *you* as an informal equivalent; as noted above, it is either found across registers (Biber et al. 1999) or is stylistically equivalent to it (Wales 1996). It would be preferable to describe *you* as 'non-formal' rather than 'informal'. I came across an indication of this lack of informality in Chris Patten's recent offering *What Next?* Amongst a fairly formal discussion of the problems of the 21st century comes an (admittedly rare) use of *you*:

5 The issues are so profound that you cannot depend, as in negotiating most other international issues…, on negotiating a deal and going home to try to put it into place. (2008:440)

Carter and McCarthy (2006:286), in a discussion of academic discourse, note the frequency of generic *you* in both speech and writing (though it is less frequent than *we* in the latter). They give the following example (from a written text):

6 If you consider, for example, the plan of the Cistercian monasteries…

This text seems to echo the non-informal nature of the Patten example. They also mention the juxtaposition with *one*.

Scope of reference

So what is the rationale for using generic *you*? According to Siewierska, in this use (she calls it 'impersonal') the addressee 'is directly invited to imagine himself in the situation or event expressed by the speaker and thus share in the world-view being presented or entertained' (2004:212). She gives the following example:

7 You add the eggs to the butter, not the other way round. (2004:11)

In this sense, while reference is to people in general, the emphasis is on the addressee, just as it is with specific reference. However, Siewierska points out that reference can extend to the speaker, as do Quirk et al., using this example:

8 It wasn't a bad life. You got up at seven… (1985:354)

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Here the reference is far from universal, though perhaps the speaker is trying to make it seem to be a generalisation. In fact reference here – if there is any at all – seems to exclude the addressee. This is also the case in this example from a magazine article I encountered based on an interview with a 'madam':

9 'But in this industry you never name names', she says. 'Your clients need to be able to trust you. When you get a really famous person, of course, you want to say something. "But then we'd say, for example: 'the lead singer of the most famous band in the world".' (*Sunday Morning Post Magazine*, January 18, 2009)

The reference seems to be to the speaker and others in the profession, i.e. to the interviewee and 'colleagues', but note the switch to *we* when she is no longer trying to engage the interviewer.[1]

Wales (1996:78–9) likewise notes an 'egocentric' use where the 'generalisations are of such a "low order" that they are simply a reiteration of personal experiences or of personal habitual behaviour'. She gives the following spoken example:

10 it always rather shook me when I first got married in London you'd be carrying away practically buckets of that stuff every day…

Chalker (1990:437) goes as far as to classify this as a third, self-referential, use of *you*, exemplifying it with this question and answer exchange:

11 Did you enjoy living on a boat? Well you got used to it. (the first mention is of course specific)

Indeed, reference can be completely detached from the participants in the speech event, as in this example from a book on popular history:

12 Indeed, until September 1942 you were more likely to die if you were a British civilian than if you were in the armed forces. (Whithington 2008:194)

We might ask whether we are dealing with a 'second-person' pronoun at all here, since there are so many different scopes of reference, some of which exclude the addressee. I feel that this is the case since the point of all these examples seems to be to make the reader/listener involved (as per Siewierska's formulation above). Compared to the alternatives (*a person*, *people*, *one*) *you* brings the events described to adressees, whether or not they are or could actually be participants in them; it makes the text more 'personal'.

For this reason Siewierska's label 'impersonal' might be considered inappropriate, but we might also ask whether 'generic' is an appropriate term. Indeed, Huddleston and Pullum (2002:1467–8) call this the 'non-referential' use of *you*. Regardless of whether 'reference' is the appropriate concept here, there is undoubtedly an element of generalisation involved (alongside the personal appeal), even if it is of a low order, as per Wales' quote above. Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain the switch from *I* to *you* in her example (12 above). So perhaps 'generic' is worth retaining as a term.

There is one particular limitation with the use of generic *you*. As Siewierska points out, it is 'an appropriate impersonalising strategy only in the case of neutral or inoffensive situations or events which the addressee can imagine himself being involved in' (2004:212). This was a very real problem for the makers of the Cobuild dictionaries, who had a default strategy of using *you* in definitions of verbs with human agents; obviously, they could not explain an unpleasant notion such as 'murder' in this way:

13 When you murder someone…

Instead they opted for the infinitive: *To murder someone… Love*, however is considered to be a suitable attribute:

14 If you love someone... (*Cobuild Dictionary* 1995:992)

In literature

Some further facets of generic *you* can be illustrated from works of literature, both fiction and non-fiction. Pete McCarthy, in his travelogue of Irish bars, *McCarthy's Bar*, gives two delightful examples where *you* is both specific and generic in the same sentence. In the first the writer has just shaken hands on meeting the women of the house where he is to stay, and she announces:

15 'Sure, ye can see ye've never done a hard day's work in your life.' (2000:36)

In the second, two drunken tourists are leaving a hotel, and the manager calls after them:

16 *'You can tell you're not Irish.'* (2000:368)

Another interesting phenomenon, whereby a question and answer exchange can take place

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with *you* occurring (coreferentially) in both parts, is exemplified in John Updike's *Terrorist*; here the protagonist is being questioned by his 'guide':

17 The shaikh went on, 'In a war, if the soldier besides you falls…do you run and hide, or do you march on, into the guns of the enemy?'
'You march on.' (2006:271)

Note that this example differs from that given by Chalker (11 above) above, since *you* is generic in both cases.

Frequency

So how common is generic *you*? There are two issues to be tackled here: the first is the frequency of *you* in modern English overall; the second is the proportion of its occurrence that can be attributed to the generic use. The first is easy to establish; the second, not so.

In the *Collins Cobuild Wordbanks Online* corpus, *you* occurs 2.6 million times out of a total of 524 million words, i.e. once in every 200 words. Kennedy (1998:98) ranks it as the 14th most frequent word type according to the Birmingham Corpus (a forerunner of *Cobuild's Bank of English*); the rank would be higher if *your* (and *yours*) were included. In other corpora that he cites it varies between 7th and 33rd place. Clearly, despite this variation, *you* is a very frequent word, and its proper use and understanding is important for users of the language. Equally, though, the variation in ranking suggests that the frequency of *you* is sensitive to the composition of the corpus.[2]

Although generic *you* has been noted as common in some references above, no quantitative information is given, so I attempted a small informal survey. I selected one hundred concordance lines randomly from the *Collins Cobuild Wordbanks Online* corpus. A 200 character context was used in order to give more context for disambiguating; a few cases which were not clear were not counted. Using substitution with *one* as a test and interpreting for generalization, I found 33 (i.e. one third) to be generic. This finding of course must be treated with great caution, and as being dependent on the make-up of the corpus, as noted above. Nevertheless, it would seem that generic *you* is indeed a significant phenomenon in modern English.

The contrastive dimension

The next question is whether generic *you* is a problem for learners of English. Might not its appearance in their native languages prepare them for it? English is certainly not the only language that has a generic use of second-person pronouns; according to Siewierska it is common throughout Europe. However, in languages where there is a choice in number (unlike English) it is the singular pronoun that is selected for this function: *tu* in French, *ty* in Polish, etc. This is probably because the plural (or non-singular) is often used for polite address in such languages, as Siewierska points out (2004:211).

Siewierska also gives a list of languages outside Europe which from her experience use *you* generically (2004:212); Mandarin is one of them and the related Cantonese is similar, according to my informants. However, Siewierska also points out that in none of these languages is generic *you* as common as in English, though, apparently under the influence of English, its use is increasing (2004: 212).

There are three possible reasons for its comparative frequency in English. Firstly, as noted, the third person generic pronoun in English, *one*, is restricted in its application, whereas its counterparts in other languages (e.g. French *on*, or German *man*) are not. Secondly, in languages such as Cantonese and Mandarin, there are simple ways of achieving generic reference without the use of a personal pronoun (compared to, say, the syntactically complex passive in English). English therefore seems to have a greater need for *you* in its generic sense. Thirdly, it may be that there is an overall trend in modern English towards lessening the distance between writer and reader, of which the use of generic *you* is only a part.

So while we cannot attribute the case of confusion in the introduction entirely to the absence of a similar use in the L1, it could be argued that the difference between the intention and the translated interpretation in this case is due to the relative frequency in English and infrequency in Cantonese. This would suggest that there is a case for focussing at least as much on the generic as on the specific use in the EFL classroom. So the next question is: what then is being done about this in the teaching of English? The following section addresses this issue.

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Coverage in pedagogic materials

As we have seen, all three scientific grammars used in this study mention generic *you*; however, the descriptions are brief, and in two cases are derived from that for *one*. At the other end of the metalinguistic spectrum, a number of EFL classroom coursebooks and grammar practice books were also surveyed; not unexpectedly, no mention was found. In between there are a number of fields which I surveyed; all of these have a number of competing volumes from which I made a hopefully representative selection.

Pedagogic grammars

Of the five surveyed – all of the more extensive kind – all mention this use. As already mentioned, there is a fairly lengthy discussion of it in Carter and McCarthy (2006:286),[3] and the Cobuild Grammar (2005:29) gives the traditional paradigm in tabular form and underneath a short paragraph describing both types. It is interesting to note that the description for generic *you* uses the impersonal passive (*'You' is also used…*) whereas that for specific *you* uses 'you' (*You refer to the person you are talking to as 'you'*), suggesting that the generic use is only for receptive not productive use. And it is ironic that the sentence which describes *you* with specific reference actually includes an example of it with generic reference.

Turning now to alphabetically-ordered reference grammars, Swan (1995) mentions it twice: on page 432 along with other personal pronouns and on page 393, where it is compared to *one*:

> 18 One/You can't learn a language in six weeks.

Chalker (1990), as described above, gives not just a generic but also a self-referring use, while Leech et al. (2001:612) refer to it as a 'general' use.

Introductory student textbooks on grammar

Such books are important because students who use them often go on to become teachers. Of the six books surveyed, three (Greenbaum and Nelson, 2002, Collins and Hollo, 2000, Jackson, 2002)) give the personal pronoun paradigm but do not mention generic uses. Wardaugh (2003) gives a brief mention of generic uses (including *you*) while Downing and Locke mention generic *we* (1992: 413–14) but not *you*. Huddleston and Pullum (2005: 103) discuss it under the label of a 'non-deictic use'; this is to be expected since it is derived from the authors' scientific grammar where it is also mentioned (Huddleston and Pullum 2002), though it is not clear why they have replaced the term 'non-referential'.

Grammar courses for teachers

Four popular courses were surveyed: Yule (1998), Parrott (2000), Master (1996) and Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999). The first has no mention of personal pronouns at all, the second has a very brief general mention of personal pronouns, and while the third mentions the traditional paradigm, there is nothing on the specific/generic distinction. The fourth gives the paradigm and discusses problems for learners, but the only ones mentioned for *you* are the lack of formal/intimate and singular/plural distinctions (1999:304). The lack of mention of generic *you* in these books may be down to the fact that to some extent they are bound to reflect classroom practice. This may, however, lead to a vicious circle: because an item is not mentioned in courses for learners, it is not included in books for teachers, and so on.

Conclusions and recommendations

As we have seen, personal pronouns in English are largely dealt with in terms of the traditional paradigm relating to specific reference. Even where the generic use is mentioned, it is as an adjunct to the former. *You* is largely described as a second-person pronoun, used to refer to the addressee(s) in the act of communication. Outside of dictionaries and scientific and the more extensive pedagogic grammars, little attention is paid to its use to refer generically.

Nevertheless, this is an important use. Its essence seems to lie in the attempt by a speaker to involve the listener in the actions or states being described. It is no longer restricted to informal contexts, if it ever was, and is better described as non-formal. There is a proliferation of terms to describe it: 'impersonal', 'indefinite', 'generic', 'non-referential', 'non-specific' and 'general'. The term 'generic', though not perfect, is perhaps the best.

Some other interesting points have been noted about generic *you*:

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- it is not always easy to distinguish from specific *you*
- it can co-occur with *one*
- it is used even if the addressee could not possibly be a referent
- it can be used to avoid overt self-reference
- it can co-occur with specific *you* in the same utterance
- it can occur in both parts of a question and answer exchange.

Some concluding recommendations can be made:

(i) Scientific grammars need to mention generic *you* in its own right, not as secondary use of *you* or a poor cousin of *one*. If anything *one* should be introduced as a formal (and less frequent) equivalent of *you*.

(ii) Teachers need to be aware of this use, as do other groups of professionals for whom a full understanding of language use is important, such as interpreters and judges. Courses for teachers and students of English need to discuss it.

(iii) If necessary, advanced learners can be exposed to it via examples such as those above (for receptive purposes if not for productive use as per the *Cobuild* grammar).

Notes

1 This example also displays how this generic use extends to *you* as object, and the possessive *your*. *Yours* can also be generic though this is generally not noted:

What do you do when the children are yours?

2 Another dimension of variation would, of course, be according to varieties of English worldwide, but such a comparison is beyond the scope of this article.

3 Surprisingly, in the section on pronouns (2006:377) there is only a brief mention of this.

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