It’s all about *you* in Dutch

Helen de Hoop and Sammie Tarenskeen

Radboud University Nijmegen

Abstract

Although second person pronouns are typically thought of as referring to the addressee, we find that in almost half the cases the personal pronoun *you* is used in the Spoken Dutch Corpus, it gets a generic (impersonal) interpretation. A further examination of the contexts in which these two readings of *you* arise reveals that in declaratives 66% receives a generic and 34% a deictic reading. For questions, only 12% of readings is generic, and 88% is deictic. 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, following Wechsler (2010), that second person pronouns initially give rise to the deictic reading via self-ascription by the addressee, 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 also explain why the generic use of *you* seems to evoke a reading of empathy often reported in the literature (e.g., Malamud 2012).

1. Introduction

The popular hashtag *yolo*, an abbreviation for “you only live once”, is often used in tweets these days and is described as ‘the dumbass’s excuse for something stupid that they did’ in the Online Urban Dictionary ([www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com)). This clearly indicates that the second person pronoun *you* in this expression refers to the speaker (that is, the person who wrote the tweet) rather than to the addressee. Although the abbreviation is used as an excuse for something the speaker did, the statement itself is clearly generic as it holds for
people in general, not just the speaker or the addressee. This paper makes a binary distinction between the deictic and generic reading of the pronoun you and its equivalent je ‘you.sg’ in Dutch.\(^1\) The deictic reading of je ‘you’, has the basic meaning of the second person pronoun, as the pronoun refers to the addressee.

The generic reading captures the other reading, i.e., when the pronoun does not refer to the addressee, or at least not exclusively. Van der Auwera et al (to appear) refer to the pronoun you in the latter case as a human impersonal pronoun that can have an inclusive reading, that is, including the speaker and the addressee. As such, they distinguish you from human impersonal pronouns such as they, that exclude both the speaker and the addressee. We will not adopt the term human impersonal pronoun, but rather the term generic reading, to refer to the reading in which you does not exclusively refer to the addressee. The term deictic reading is reserved for the reading in which you does exclusively refer to the addressee. Note that the generic reading of you does not only occur in generic sentences, nor does the deictic reading only occur in episodic sentences. The following two sentences illustrate this (van der Auwera et al, to appear):

(1) You drink too much
(2) You could see that he was nervous

Sentence (1) is a generic or habitual sentence, but you gets a deictic reading, referring exclusively to the addressee. Sentence (2) on the other hand is an episodic sentence in which you gets a generic interpretation: the speaker could see that he was nervous and anyone including the addressee could have seen it if they were there at that time. This paper does not distinguish a separate speaker-referring use of you. We will take speaker-referring you to be an instantiation of the generic reading, and not as another instantiation of the deictic reading (contra Zeijlstra 2011). There is one more caveat we should add here: although the name deictic may suggest otherwise and we will use this term as well as the more common ‘reference to the addressee’ to describe this reading, we believe in fact, following Wechsler

---

\(^1\) The same two readings can be obtained for the unreduced counterparts of je ‘you.sg’, namely jij ‘you.sg.nom’, jou ‘you.sg.acc’, and the possessive pronoun jouw ‘your’, but the generic reading is not available for the plural pronoun jullie ‘you.pl’, nor for the polite form u ‘you.hon’. In this paper, we focus on the reduced form je ‘you.sg’, which is the unmarked and most frequent form of the second person pronoun in Dutch.
(2010), that the second person pronoun does not actually refer to the addressee at all, as will be discussed in Section 5. Rather, it is interpreted as an indication for the addressee to ‘self-ascribe’ the property of being you.

In the following section we will present the interpretive effects that have been reported in the literature of using a second person pronoun for generic reference. In Section 3 a corpus study is presented on the deictic and generic use of the second person pronoun je ‘you’ in spoken Dutch. We find that the two uses of je ‘you’ occur almost equally frequent 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. In Section 5 we will discuss Wechsler’s (2010) extension of the de se theory for first person pronouns to second person pronouns, and we will use this theory to argue that the second person pronoun retains its orginal meaning of address, even with a generic use. This will create certain effects, such as evoking the addressee’s empathy for the speaker’s perspective. We will present an Optimality Theoretic model of how the two readings of you are obtained in context. The conclusion is presented in Section 6.

2. The generic reading of the second person pronoun

The second person pronoun in Dutch can have the deictic and the generic reading, similar to English. Consider for example an interview with soccer player Giovanni van Bronckhorst:

(3) Interviewer:
   Ik gok zo maar dat het voor jou het bijzonderste is.
   I guess so that it for 2SG.ACC the special.SUPER is
   “I take it that this is the most important for you.”

   Van Bronckhorst:
   Nou ja, ik denk voor iedereen natuurlijk, maar...

---

2 Abbreviations used in the glosses: 1,2,3 = first, second, third person; ACC = accusative case; COMP = complementizer; DIM = diminutive; HON = honorific; PART = particle; RED = reduced; SG = singular, SUPER = superlative.
“Well yes, I think it is important for everyone of course, but ... Yes, it is great that you won Uruguay in the semi-finals and yes, scoring such a goal in the semi-finals, you can only dream of it.”

(Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeFmjTHI7LU&feature=related)

The underlined jou ‘you.sg.acc’ in this excerpt clearly refers to the addressee, in this case van Bronckhorst. By contrast, the use of je ‘you’ by van Bronckhorst (in boldface) is generic, and it may even be considered speaker-referring, since van Bronckhorst is the one who made the first goal.

The following utterance is taken from the Spoken Dutch Corpus. Note that je ‘you’ in this case clearly seems to refer to the speaker:

(4) 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 clear indication of the speaker-referring use of the second person pronoun in (4) is the pronoun switch from second person je ‘you’ to first person ik ‘I’ within one utterance and
referring to the same person, namely the speaker. Still, the use of *je* ‘you’ instead of *ik* ‘I’ gives the utterance a flavor of generalization which is perfectly understandable, as the speaker also represents ‘the secondary school teacher’ in the interview. One more example is given below, also taken from the Spoken Dutch Corpus.

(5) Maar *ik* ben cursistenbegeleidster van de nieuwkomers
but *I* am student.supervisor of the newcomers

dus de inburgeraars die een contract met de gemeente
so the integration.candidates that a contract with
the city.council

hebben en die moet *je* nauwlettend in de gaten
have and these must *you* carefully in the gaps

houden met presentie en voortgang
keep with presence and progress

“But, *I* train the newcomers so the immigrants who have contracts with the council,
and *you* have to keep a close eye on their absences and progress”

In (5) we can infer from the context that the speaker is the one who has to keep an eye on the new students, which is a reason why we could classify *je* ‘you’ as speaker-referring. However, it is also the case that anyone in the speaker’s position would have to keep a close eye on those students, which makes the reference generic as well.

While it is perfectly possible to distinguish between the deictic and the generic readings of *je* ‘you’ in Dutch, serious problems arise when we try to tell apart instances of generic and ‘purely’ speaker-referring second person. Therefore, we decided not to distinguish a separate class of speaker-referring *je* ‘you’ in Dutch. Instead, we analyze the speaker-referring reading as an instance of generic *je* ‘you’. We only assume two categorical values for the meaning of *je* ‘you’ in Dutch, deictic (i.e., referring to the addressee) and generic (which includes the speaker-referring use).
Our approach is different from Zeijlstra’s (2011) in this respect. Zeijlstra (2011) argues that the deictic (addressee-referring) and the speaker-referring reading can be captured under the comprehensive label of [participant], that refers to the feature of being a discourse participant, a feature shared by speaker and addressee, but which other persons lack. According to Zeijlstra (2011) Dutch je ‘you’ lacks the explicit feature of [addressee] but (still) has the feature of [participant]. As such it can refer to either the addressee or to the speaker. According to Zeijlstra je ‘you’ can be deictic in two ways: either it refers to the hearer (only) or it refers to the speaker. When je ‘you’ refers to the addressee (in our terminology, has a deictic reading) it is a result of Maximize Presupposition.3 A speaker who wishes to refer to only the speaker will use ik ‘I’, because this pronoun has the feature [speaker]. If the speaker uses you to refer to the speaker, however, this evokes ‘other possible worlds’ such as to include worlds in which je ‘you’ is the addressee. Maximize Presupposition then gives rise to the implicature that the addressee would do the same in such a world, that is, when the addressee were in the speaker’s situation. Zeijlstra (2011) argues that this self-referring reading cannot be an instantiation of the generic/impersonal reading of you (contra Tarenskeen 2010), although he recognizes that the semantic correspondence between impersonal (generic) and speaker-referring you does not appear to be coincidental. In our view, you can be either deictic, when it exclusively refers to the addressee, or generic. We consider the self-referring reading, as far as it is distinguishable at all, an instantiation of the generic reading. Recall that we do not say that the generic reading of you can only occur in generic sentences, as already illustrated by examples (2) and (4) above, which is also why a speaker-referring you can be an instantiation of the generic reading of you in our view.

As pointed out above, the second person singular pronoun je ‘you’ can have a deictic as well as a generic reading. The reference of generic pronouns is usually considered to be roughly equivalent to ‘people’, ‘everyone’, ‘anyone’ (Egerland 2003), ‘someone’, or ‘the typical person’ (Moltmann 2006). Generic pronouns in natural conversation do not usually refer to all people in the world, but to a subset thereof. Ramat and Sansò (2006) show that man-

---

3 Zeijlstra’s (2011: 12) definition of Maximize Presupposition: If domain (ψ) entails domain (φ), ψ is a scalar alternative of φ, and ψ and φ are equivalent, assertion of ψ entails that the speaker doesn’t believe domain (ψ) to make a felicitous contribution to the conversation.
elements, impersonal pronouns derived from the noun meaning ‘man’, refer in the developmental stages to ‘all human race’ or ‘mankind’. These elements grammaticalized into pronouns that can refer to more restricted, relevant subgroups of people. Although je ‘you’ is etymologically different from man-elements, its behavior as a generic pronoun is apparently quite similar to those elements.

A comparison between generic je ‘you’ and generic ze ‘they’ shows an interesting difference, which is illustrated in (6) and (7).

(6) In Frankrijk drinken ze wijn bij het eten.
   in France drink they wine with the dinner
   “In France they drink wine with dinner.”

(7) In Frankrijk drink je wijn bij het eten.
   in France drink you wine with the dinner
   “In France you drink wine with dinner.”

Both (6) and (7) are generic sentences, but where (6) is interpreted as a statement about French people, (7) can be paraphrased as ‘If you are in France, you drink wine with dinner’. Whereas ze ‘they’ does not presuppose a conditional, je ‘you’ does. The difference can be explained by the origins of the pronouns. The generic use of ze ‘they’ is quite similar to basic use as a third person plural pronoun: both generic and deictic ze ‘they’ refer to a group of (other) people, excluding the speaker and addressee. 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’ refers to a subset of people, in which the speaker and addressee may be included. Adding a conditional clause to the statement in (7) shows the similarity between both uses: if you were in France, you would be supposed to drink wine with dinner too. There is an appeal to the addressee to imagine themselves in a certain situation (cf. Malamud 2006, 2012; Tarenskeen 2010).

The mechanism of generalizing specific experiences, feelings and the like is omnipresent in conversations (see e.g., Scheibman 2007). Speakers do not typically utter well-founded,
inductively established generalizations; rather, they generalize intuitively, often on the basis of their own experiences. Apparently, people are inclined to believe that what is true for themselves is true for everyone else or at least for those people they identify with. The following example from the Spoken Dutch Corpus illustrates this phenomenon. The speaker is a teacher of Dutch as a second language for immigrants.

(8) Maar de laatste twee jaar zit ik vooral met de hogeropgeleiden en da’s wel heel leuk tuurlijk daar kun je echt goede gesprekken mee voeren “But the last two years I have mostly worked with higher educated people and that’s very nice of course. You can have really good conversations with them”

It is unlikely that people in general have better conversations with highly educated people than with less well-educated people; however, we assume that the speaker herself likes to talk with the highly educated immigrants and that she assumes or hopes this holds for the addressee as well. In our view, the speaker of (8) would have come across as arrogant, had she used a first person pronoun here, as if she were emphasizing her own high educational status. Also using ik ‘I’ would have made the speaker the topic of the sentence rather than the highly educated immigrants (cf. Sansò 2006). We believe that the reason the speaker uses the second person pronoun here is not only to avoid the first person pronoun, but also because the message she wishes to express is not about herself, but about the immigrants. Her conversational partner will probably recognize and accept this generalization. According to Scheibman (2007), generalizations indeed have an inclusive effect: the conversational partners use them in order to emphasize their mutual agreement.

In fact, generic je ‘you’ can even be used specifically without referring to the speaker. The following utterance is an example of you referring to a group of boys excluding the speaker and the addressee.

(9) En dat is wel moeilijk om die jongens aan
and that is difficult these boys at

de the going to want ja of die zijn met
the get because yes or these are with
hun their brommers aan het sleutelen of ze hebben
their mopes at the tinkering or they have
een een krantenwijk of ze zitten in de supermarkt of
a newspaper.district or they sit in the supermarket or
ze they hebben een andere baan en dan komt school
they have an other job and then comes school
in feite in fact very badly out because je d'r dan nog bij
in the work bent
at the work are

“It’s difficult to get those boys going because they are either tinkering with their mopeds, or they have a paper round, they’re at the supermarket or some other job and school is really a nuisance because you're also working on the side”

In (9) a teacher of Dutch on a secondary school for professional training is talking about his pupils’ motivation problems. Clearly, je ‘you’ does not refer to the speaker nor to a subset of people in which the speaker is included: it refers to die jongens ‘those boys’. We still call this reading generic and not deictic for two reasons. First, it does not refer to the addressee, which is the only reading we would call deictic, and second, because the reading of the pronoun is generalized after all. The utterance is a generalization from a strongly empathizing perspective: the speaker presents the respective situations as completely imaginable. Therefore, this is another instantiation of a generic reading of the second person pronoun.

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, nor is the speaker-referring use. There are observations of speaker-referring second person pronouns in English (Scheibman 2001, 2007; Hyman 2004; Mildorf 2006), French (Laberge & Sankoff 1979), Finnish (Laitinen 2006), and Modern Hebrew (Perez & Tobin 2009). In fact, speaker-reference of generic
pronouns widely occurs throughout languages, regardless of their form. The impersonal pronouns with human reference, which are highly common in Europe, can be used specifically (Kitagawa & Lehrer 1990), and the same holds for zero constructions as found in Finnish and Mandarin Chinese (Siewierska 2004), and the morphemes with generic human reference that occur in rGyalrong (Sino-Tibetan; Sun 2005) and Athapaskan languages like Dogrib and Slave (Saxon 1993).

Some languages have an impersonal pronoun that refers unambiguously to the first person in certain contexts. The best known example is French on, which is probably due to the fact that it has largely replaced the original first person plural pronoun nous in subject position (Laberge & Sankoff 1979; Coveney 2000). Swedish man is different from French on and Italian si in that the latter have a first person plural referent (Cinque 1988), whereas the former refers to the first person singular (Egerland 2003). This is illustrated in (10), which was taken from a broadcast interview with a local worker on a factory being closed down.

(10)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{SP1} & \quad \text{Och hur upplever du företags-ledning-en-s agerande?} \\
& \quad \text{and how experience you company’s-management-the-’s action} \\
& \quad \text{“And how do you feel about the board’s actions?”}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{SP2} & \quad \text{Man blir besviken} \\
& \quad \text{one becomes disappointed} \\
& \quad \text{“One gets disappointed.”}
\end{align*}
\]

[Ragnarsdóttir & Strömqvist 2005:146 (7)]

This little dialogue is strongly reminiscent of speaker-referring je ‘you’: on the basis of contextual cues (the interviewer asks the addressee how he feels), we can infer that the interviewee is talking about himself. The impersonal pronoun one in English can also be used to refer to the speaker in a generalized way, as shown by the example in (11), provided by van der Auwera et al (to appear), and uttered by a British politician:
One doesn’t want to set quotas. One doesn’t want to set diktats, but one does want to maintain a dialogue and one does want to maintain pressure.

[van der Auwera, Gast & Vanderbiesen to appear, example (70)]

That impersonal pronouns have a special relation with the speaker is not a new observation. 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, which is in line with our finding that je ‘you’ sometimes refers specifically to a third rather than a first person, as in the fragment in (9) above. Note that the fact that the third person impersonal pronoun one as an impersonal pronoun can be speaker-referring just like you, is problematic for Zeijlstra’s (2011) analysis of speaker-referring you in Dutch. According to Zeijlstra, speaker-referring you is possible because you lacks the feature [addressee] but crucially maintains the feature [participant]. The feature [participant] however is only available for first and second person pronouns that refer to the speaker and/or the addressee. The Swedish pronoun man and the English pronoun one are both third person, and therefore lack the feature [participant]. The lack of this [participant] feature should render speaker-reference impossible. The fact that these third person impersonal pronouns can be used to refer to the speaker, just like the English and Dutch second person pronoun you, presents further evidence for our view that the speaker-referring reading of you is just a special instantiation of the generic (impersonal) reading.

The idea that generic second person pronouns retain something of their original addressing flavor is not new (see for instance Malamud 2012 and references cited therein). Most authors agree that there is a clear connection between the generic and personal uses of pronouns (e.g. Bolinger 1979; Hyman 2004). For a number of languages several authors have compared the generic use of the second person pronoun to its impersonal counterpart (e.g., Bolinger 1979 and Malamud 2006 for English one; Jensen 2009 for Danish man) and the intuitions are very similar: there is a difference in perspective, which is caused by the
inherent invitation to the addressee to put themselves into someone else’s shoes, and which appeals to the addressee’s involvement and feelings of empathy. Jensen (2009) takes this difference to be the cause of the increase of *du* ‘you’ at the cost of *man* ‘one’. Hyman (2004), who does not specifically focus on the speaker-referring but rather on the generic use of *you* in general, suggests that modesty might play a role. Speakers who talk about themselves might seem more modest when they use *you* instead of *I*. Mildorf (2006) claims that speaker-referring *you* is generic in the first place, which creates the possibility for distancing, while keeping its deictic flavor, which creates involvement, as the addressee is invited to identify with the speaker’s situation. This distancing effect of *you* can also be strategically used when the speaker feels uncomfortable or is ashamed. This makes it possible to use *you* strategically, for example, in order to avoid criticism. Scheibman (2001, 2007) when focusing on pronoun shift from *I* to *you*, suggests two motivations. First, she refers to this use of *you* as “iconic distancing”, following Abney (1996), who claims that pronoun shifting can be used as a distancing technique in conversations on uncomfortable topics. Second, she claims that generalizations in discourse have a solidarity marking function. Generalizations in this context are assumed to be based, usually, on personal and social expectations and beliefs, instead of being inductively constructed. By switching from *I* to *you*, speakers are generalizing from their own stance: they appeal to societal norms, and thus to the beliefs of their conversational partners. Formulating a claim as a generalization thus has a broadening and an inclusive effect. Such a shift can be regarded as a strategy “to build empathy with other participants” (Scheibman 2007: 132). This effect is strengthened by the deictic origin of *you*, which results in implicit reference to the addressee. In section 5 we will present an analysis which covers both the distancing effect of not using *I* and the empathy-effect of using *you*.

3. A corpus study on the second person pronoun in spoken Dutch

In the previous sections it became clear that the second person pronoun *je* ‘you’ in Dutch is flexible in that it can refer either deictically or generically. Deictic reference is exclusively used for reference to the addressee, while speaker-reference and specific third person reference are assumed to be instantiations of generic reference. That is, we assume that *you* specifically refers to the addressee (deictic) or not (generic). In order to find out how
frequent these uses actually are, we conducted a corpus study of the Spoken Dutch Corpus (CGN). In this section we report on this study. We found that the second person pronoun *je* ‘you’ in Dutch refers to the addressee only in about half the cases. Otherwise it is used for generic reference.

### 3.1 Methodology

The Spoken Dutch Corpus (CGN) is a database of Dutch speech, collected between 1998 and 2004, and it consists of about nine million words. Both Netherlandic and Flemish Dutch are represented, but as the Flemish use of second person pronouns is very different from the Netherlandic use, we excluded Flemish Dutch data. The CGN has fifteen components that represent different speech situations, varying in their degree of spontaneity from natural conversations to read speech. We selected those components that contain spontaneous speech, that is, spontaneous face-to-face conversations, interviews with teachers of Dutch, and telephone dialogues.

For our subcorpus, we took all tokens of the personal pronoun *je* ‘you’ from the components that represent spontaneous speech. The total number of *je* ‘you’ tokens was 56796. We randomly drew 1% from these tokens, evenly distributed over the different components, and eliminated tokens that were not used as a subject, as well as those incorrectly annotated as a personal pronoun (being a possessive pronoun or a diminutive suffix, which both have the same form as the personal pronoun) and the ones that were part of read (that is, non-spontaneous) speech. The elimination round resulted in a final subcorpus of 466 tokens.

Context is an important factor for the correct interpretation and therefore each item was carefully examined in its original context. This set of data was annotated by two independent annotators for type of reading of the second person pronoun: deictic (referring to the addressee) or generic (including speaker-referring). Initially, our intention included annotating *je* ‘you’ separately for being speaker-referring or not. This, however, turned out to be highly problematic. It was impossible to formulate strict conditions for the annotation
of speaker-referring tokens. Formulating strict conditions that a token must meet to be annotated as speaker-referring appeared impossible.

The inter-annotator agreement was 89.5%, Cohen’s kappa 0.8. This reflects a very high agreement between the two annotators. One of the annotators used a third category, ‘?’ when she was in doubt, which decreased the consistency and explains why the inter-annotator agreement was not even higher. Therefore, the two annotators independently re-annotated the items for which their annotations were not the same, and then resolved the remaining disagreement through discussion. In the end, 8 items could not be annotated for either of the two readings because the ambiguity between the two could not be solved.

3.2 Results

The results of the annotation are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>reference</th>
<th>absolute</th>
<th>relative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>deictic</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>53.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>generic</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ambiguous</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Reference of je ‘you’ in CGN subcorpus

It is noteworthy that the second person pronoun je ‘you’, in spoken Dutch refers to the addressee in only 53 per cent of the cases. This percentage seems to be rather low, given that the main function of the second person pronoun is assumed to be referring to the addressee. Apparently, this use of the second person pronoun is not as omnipresent as is often thought.

3.3 Discussion

The fact that for half the tokens the second person pronoun you in Dutch does not actually refer to the addressee begs the question how such a pattern can exist in a language without
leading to massive miscommunication. In fact, the annotation of the corpus for the two readings and the high inter-annotator agreement already revealed that this flexible use of the second person pronoun hardly ever gives rise to ambiguity. The question is how this is possible, since it is not the case that generic you only occurs in generic sentences like (7) above, ‘in France, you drink wine with dinner’, nor that deictic you only occurs in episodic sentences. Deictic you is also found in generic sentences, such as (1) above, ‘you drink too much’. Generic you can also be found in modal contexts, as in (3) ‘you can only dream of that’, (5) ‘you have to keep a close eye on them’ and (8) ‘you can have good conversations with them’. Generic you can occur in a quantified episodic context, such as (4) ‘every once in a while you’re looking around’ or be clearly episodic, as in (2) ‘you could see that he was nervous’ (van der Auwera et al, to appear), and (3) ‘you won Uruguay’. The use of modal verbs, conditionals or perception verbs seem to facilitate a generic reading of you, but such contexts are not necessary nor sufficient to elicit a generic reading of you.

Another difference in contexts that may play a role in distinguishing between the two readings of you is the difference between the two functions of language, the descriptive and the interactive function, such as traditionally studied in e.g. speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969). Propositions with a third and first person are generally used to describe the world, as they deal with (objective) truth, knowledge, and narration, while second person subjects are often used to direct or to interact, i.e., to persuade, to influence another person’s behaviour or opinions (cf. Foolen and de Hoop 2009). For example, sentence (12) can be used by a speaker to describe the state of affairs such that (at least according to the speaker) there is a possibility that he (whoever he refers to) will try to put the key into this slot, while in (13) a different interpretation emerges as the preferred one (von Fintel 2006).

(12) He might try to put the key into this slot
(13) You might try to put the key into this slot

Von Fintel (2006) points out that the second sentence is preferably read as a suggestion by the speaker to the addressee to put the key into the slot. Hence, the sentence is no longer meant to convey (objective) information about the world (it might happen that...), but rather to instruct the addressee. Suggestions as in (13) above are interactive and they always seem
to be directed at the addressee, that is, a second or inclusive person pronoun but not a first or third person. In Georgian, there is a special construction for expressing suggestions of which the subject may only be second person or inclusive (Harris 1984, de Schepper & de Hoop 2012). In general, third and first person seem to be used descriptively, while second person is used interactively. A personal pronoun that can refer to either first or second person singular is the pronoun awak in Jambi Malay (Lukman 2009). It may be expected that a pronoun that is both used for second and first person reference will frequently lead to miscommunication, but this does not seem to be the case. It turns out that the pronoun awak in Jambi Malay is hardly ever ambiguous in the actual context of an utterance. For example, in the question ‘Will awak go to the market?’ the pronoun is immediately taken to refer to the second person (interactively), while in the statement ‘Awak will go to the market’ the hearer automatically assumes it refers to the first person (descriptively). Without further context (such as whether the utterance was an order, or whether it was used in an argumentation: you will go to the market, so you won’t be here when she arrives), it would be strange for a speaker to inform the addressee about their whereabouts. One context in which the pronoun awak would be ambiguous and could therefore lead to miscommunication is given in (14) (Hustarna and Lukman, p.c.):

(14) Awak yang banyaq makan tadi
   1SG/2SG that much eat PAST
   “I ate too much” or “You ate too much”

In order to avoid being considered impolite, it would be better for a speaker to choose another, unambiguous, first person pronoun here (Lukman 2009).

Some sentence types are more frequently used in one function of language than in another. Imperatives appear to be exclusively interactive in that the speaker requires a certain action from a person, usually the addressee. Declaratives are prototypically descriptive (the speaker describes the world), while questions are prototypically interactive (the speaker requests information). It is therefore less common in English to have a declarative with the second person you as a subject, or questions with a first person I (de Schepper and de Hoop 2012). In Western Apache a second person subject in a declarative leads to ill-formedness; in
such a case, an evidentiality marker must be added (de Reu 2003). In Japanese, certain experiencer predicates can only have first person subjects in declaratives and only second person subjects in interrogatives; in all other cases evidentiality markers are needed again (Tenny 2006).

Siewierska (2007) argues that impersonal reflexives are typically interpreted as referring to the speaker in declaratives, while they are interpreted as referring to the addressee in questions. The following examples from Polish illustrate this mechanism.

(15)  Proszę nie przerywać. Mówi się.
please not interrupt speak REFL
“Please don’t interrupt. I’m speaking”
[Siewierska 2007: 21 (44)]

(16)  Co się robiło na przerwach?
what REFL did on breaks
“What did you usually do during the break?”
[Siewierska 2007:19 (38)]

Clearly it is the case for Dutch as well that the ambiguous second person pronoun will often be disambiguated in the context of the utterance. In order to find out to what extent the difference between declaratives and interrogatives can be used to predict whether je ‘you’ gets a deictic or a generic reading, we did a follow-up study in the subcorpus and annotated the utterances for sentence type, distinguishing between declaratives and questions.

4. A follow-up corpus study on second person pronouns in declaratives and questions

In this section we will examine the effect of sentence type (declarative or question) on the interpretation of the second person pronoun je ‘you’ in Dutch. It will become clear that even without considering the content of the propositions, the predictive power of the sentence type for the obtained interpretation is already extremely high.
4.1 The descriptive and interactive functions of language

Our hypothesis is that there will be a difference between declaratives and questions, and that *je* ‘you’ will be relatively more often interpreted as deictic when it is the subject of a question, while it will be relatively more often interpreted as generic when it is the subject of a declarative. In the remainder of this section we will present this follow-up study and discuss the results.

4.2 Methodology

The 466 utterances of the subcorpus described in section 1 were annotated for sentence type by two independent annotators.\(^4\) Two categories of sentence types were distinguished: declaratives and questions. The inter-annotator agreement was 96% and Cohen’s kappa was 0.9, which indicates an almost perfect agreement between the two annotators. The disagreement that was initially found for 19 items, was resolved through discussion.

4.3 Results and statistical analysis

The results are presented in the diagram below that contains the number of cases that fall in each of the four categories: generic *you* in a declarative sentence (190 utterances); deictic *you* in a declarative sentence (98 utterances); generic *you* in a question (20 utterances); deictic *you* in a question (150 utterances).

---

\(^4\) The analysis was applied to only 458 sentences, as 8 sentences were ambiguous between a deictic and a generic reading (see Table 1).
Figure 1 Counted frequencies of the four categories (generic je ‘you’ in a declarative; deictic je ‘you’ in a declarative; generic je ‘you’ in a question; deictic je ‘you’ in a question)

The annotation results are shown in Table 2. We can conclude from this table that a generic interpretation of you typically occurs in declarative sentences, while the combination of a generic interpretation and a question is relatively uncommon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>reference</th>
<th>declarative</th>
<th>question</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>deictic</td>
<td>98 (21.4%)</td>
<td>150 (32.7%)</td>
<td>248 (54.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>generic</td>
<td>190 (41.5%)</td>
<td>20 (4.4%)</td>
<td>210 (45.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>288 (62.9%)</td>
<td>170 (37.1%)</td>
<td>458 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Reference of je ‘you’ in declaratives and questions

A Chi-Square test was performed to detect a correlation between type of sentence and the interpretation of you, comparing the observed frequencies to the frequencies that we would expect in case of chance distribution. $\chi^2 (1) = 126.5$, $p < 0.001$ which is indeed highly significant. The standardized residual is the error between the expected frequency and the observed frequency divided by the square root of the expected frequency. The standardized residual was highly significant ($p<0.001$) for both declaratives ($z = 5.0$ and $z = -4.6$ for generic
and deictic readings, respectively) and questions ($z = -6.6$ and $z = 6.0$ for generic and deictic readings, respectively). In other words, the type of sentence (declarative or question) has a clear effect on the interpretation that is obtained (generic or deictic).

4.4 Discussion

The type of sentence (declarative or question) has a highly significant effect on the interpretation of the second person pronoun you (generic or deictic). All four combinations of sentence type and type of reading occur, but the frequencies of the combinations differ drastically. Declarative sentences with a generic reading of you occur in 41.5% of the total of combinations of sentence type and type of reading. Two examples are given in (17) and (18):

(17) Ik vind als je zo'n intelligente kip hebt heb je eigenlijk geen hok voor nodig
I find if you such.a intelligent chicken have have you actually no coop for necessary
“I think that if you have such an intelligent chicken you don’t really need a chicken coop”

(18) Dat moet je echt heel graag willen anders doe je dat niet
that must you really very gladly want because otherwise do you that not
“You must really want to do that because otherwise you wouldn’t do that”

Questions with a deictic reading of you also frequently occur, namely in 32.7% of the cases. Two examples are given below:

(19) En hoeveel had je gedronken?
and how.much had you drunk
“And how much did you drink?”

(20) Had je mijn mailtje trouwens nog ontvangen?
had you my mail.DIM by.the.way yet received
“Did you get my email, by the way?”

The other two categories are less frequent. Declaratives with a deictic reading of you occur in 21.4% of the cases. This combination is illustrated in (21) and (22):

(21)  Je hebt niet eens een tv man
       you have not once a TV man
       “Dude you don’t even have a TV”

(22)  Maar nootjes met chocola vind je niet lekker
       But nuts DIM with chocolate find you not nice
       “But you don’t like chocolate with nuts”

Although a deictic reading of you is less frequent in declarative sentences than in questions, it brings up the question why these readings still occur in a substantial amount of around 20% of the declaratives. While questions are prototypical examples of interactive contexts, declarative sentences can also be used interactively, such as in suggestions, commands, and also in an argumentative way, to persuade the addressee to do something. Thus, the distinction between declaratives and questions does not exactly equal the cut between descriptive and interactive language, and we expect that the declarative sentences containing deictic je ‘you’ will have such an interactive function relatively often. However, we have not investigated this issue further.

Finally, questions with a generic reading of you are the least frequent. They do occur, but only in 4.4% of the cases. Two examples are given in (23) and (24):

(23)  Maar ja wat doe je d’r aan?
       but yes what do you there RED at
       “Well, what can you do about it?”

(24)  Dat weet je toch gewoon?
       that know you PART commonly
       “You just know that, don’t you?”
Because of its low frequency, the combination with the highest risk of misunderstanding would probably be this fourth category, a generic reading of you embedded in a question, as exemplified by (23) and (24). Incidentally, we found an example of such a potential case of misunderstanding. The context of this example is that after the soccer match between the Netherlands and Denmark in June 2012, which the Dutch lost 0-1, the Dutch soccer player Ibrahim Afellay tells the interviewer that the Dutch team had dominated the opening period and created many opportunities to score, and so Denmark’s goal against the run of play came as a big shock. Then the interviewer asks:


“Don’t you do something wrong then? Not you, but – I mean not you alone – but doesn’t the Dutch team do something wrong then?”

The interviewer intends a generic reading for the second person pronoun, in this case referring specifically to the soccer players of the Dutch team, which the addressee also belongs to, but because you is the subject of a question here, the interviewer fears that the addressee will arrive at a deictic reading of you. He corrects himself and makes the intended generic reading explicit. Here, the interviewer uses you in a question, and this normally yields a deictic interpretation. Hence, the addressee, Afellay, might interpret you as deictic and think that the interviewer blamed him personally for the loss. Therefore, the interviewer corrects his own utterance and replaces je ‘you’ by het Nederlandse team ‘the Dutch team’.

The frequency distribution that was found for the four combinations of sentence type and type of reading of you definitely indicates that the context helps hearers to arrive at the right interpretation – deictic or generic – of the second person pronoun you. Of course, the

---

5 Thanks to Peter de Swart (p.c.) for drawing our attention to this example.
distinction between declaratives and interrogatives is just one contextual feature, but its effect is already huge. With the help of other contextual features as well as the content of the utterances, we expect misunderstandings between speaker and addressee to hardly ever occur. This expectation is corroborated by the high agreement between the two independent annotators in deciding the type of reading of you in the corpus study.

5. The interpretation of you in context

The meaning of pronouns is often described in terms of features that determine what or who the pronoun refers to. First person pronouns have the feature [speaker], second person [addressee] or a combination of the features [participant] (which refers to a participant in the local discourse, hence both the speaker and the addressee) and [non-speaker], and the third person pronoun is commonly assumed to be void of features such as [speaker], [addressee], and [participant] and therefore to be interpreted as third person (cf. Sauerland 2008, de Schepper 2013). Second person pronouns that get a generic (or speaker-referring) interpretation are sometimes argued to have more or less features than second person pronouns that refer to the addressee. Malamud (2012), for example, proposes that impersonal (generic) you has the features [2nd] (second person), [arb] (arbitrary interpretation) and [gn] (generic interpretation). Zeijlstra (2011), on the other hand, argues that the second person pronoun je ‘you’ in Dutch crucially lacks the feature [addressee] and is therefore left with only the feature [participant]. Zeijlstra (2011) argues that because of the lack of the feature [addressee], the overarching feature [participant] allows Dutch you to refer either to the addressee (the deictic reading) or to the speaker (the speaker-referring reading). Zeijlstra’s analysis is not meant to deal with generic (impersonal) you, which he considers a different case. This means, however, that Zeijlstra cannot account for the fact that you sometimes seems to refer specifically to a third person, such as to the boys in example (9) above. Having the feature [participant] would not license such a reading. Besides, Zeijlstra (2011) assumes that the speaker-referring reading is another deictic reading that differs from the generic reading, although in fact the two readings (generic and speaker-referring) are often hard to distinguish in Dutch (cf. Tarenskeen 2010).
In this paper we have only distinguished between two readings, the deictic and the generic reading, and we will now put forward a hypothesis on how these readings are obtained, partly following Wechsler (2010) and Hogeweg (2009). We will first present Wechsler’s (2010) account of the (deictic) meaning of second person pronoun *you* (Wechsler does not take into account a generic or self-referring reading of *you*). Subsequently, we will extend Wechsler’s approach to deal with generic *you* and then propose an Optimality Theoretic account along the lines of Hogeweg (2009), to show how the two readings of *you* come about as the result of a process of optimization with respect to the interaction of two potentially conflicting constraints.

According to Wechsler (2010), a second person pronoun does not actually refer to the addressee, but rather invites the addressee to self-ascribe the property of being *you*. That is, Wechsler (2010) applies the well-known theory of self-ascription or de se of first person pronouns to the interpretation of second person pronouns. Instead of taking the standard view according to which a second person pronoun is grammatically specified for reference to the addressee, Wechsler (2010) proposes that a second person pronoun indicates self-ascription by every addressee. He illustrates the difference by discussing the interpretation of the sentence *Write your name at the top of the page*, uttered by a teacher to her class. He argues that the pronoun *your* does not refer to the addressees, and is not interpreted by the addressees as referring to the set of addressees. Rather, the theory of self-ascription predicts that each addressee *x* will interpret the second person pronoun *your* as referring to *x* (Wechsler 2010: 353) Hence, if both Tommy and Mary are addressees, Tommy understands the teacher as instructing him to write his own name (not Mary’s), while Mary understands the teacher as instructing her to write her own name (not Tommy’s). This process of self-ascription includes direct pronoun interpretation by its self-ascriber, which is the speaker for a first person pronoun and the addressee for a second person pronoun. Thus, Wechsler (2010) claims that all and only addressees self-ascribe whenever they hear a second person pronoun, while all and only speakers self-ascribe whenever they utter a first person pronoun. More generally, according to Wechsler (2010) all pronominal reference to speech-act participants (the speaker and the addressee) takes place via self-ascription. Thus, for every speaker, the first person pronoun translates as a self-notion, while for every addressee, the second person pronoun translates as a self-notion. The translation function $V$
is partial in the sense that it is not defined if somebody else than the speaker interprets a first person pronoun or if somebody else than the addressee interprets a second person pronoun. This is illustrated for the second person pronoun in (26) (Wechsler 2010: 348), in which \( A \) is the set of addressees:

\[
\forall x \in A \left[ V(<x, \text{you}^{\text{S,A}}>) = ^s\text{self} \right] ; \quad \forall x \not\in A \left[ V(<x, \text{you}^{\text{S,A}}>) \text{ is undefined} \right]
\]

Let us illustrate this process with a few examples, adopted from Wechsler (2010). Wechsler (2010) claims that \textit{you} translates as a self-notion when interpreted by the addressee, and also that self-ascription exhausts the person semantics of \textit{you} in the sense that there is no additional specification that \textit{you} must ‘refer to’ the addressee. This is shown in (27):

\[
\text{(27) Hans speaking to Paula: } [\text{Mirjam likes you}]
\]

Interpretation of the utterance by the addressee, Paula:

Conceives (Paula, \(<^p_{\text{i likes}}, ^p_n\text{Mirjam}, ^p_n\text{self}, \text{likes'} (\chi_1, \text{Paula})\>)

Paula thus directly interprets \textit{Mirjam} via her notion of Mirjam and \textit{you} via self-ascription. But if Mirjam is speaking to Paula, saying “I like you”, then while \textit{you} is directly interpreted as a self-notion by Paula, the first person pronoun \textit{I} in this utterance cannot be directly interpreted by Paula. The first person pronoun interpreted by somebody who is not the speaker calls for “indirect pronoun interpretation by a non-self-ascriber, who makes an inference from another interlocutor’s self-ascription” (Wechsler 2010: 349). The first person pronoun only indicates self-ascription for the speaker, but since Paula is not the speaker, \textit{I} remains undefined, and so a place-holder (variable) \( \eta \) appears in the formula in step 1 in (28) (Wechsler 2010: 349):

\[
\text{(28) Mirjam speaking to Paula: } [\text{I like you}]
\]

Interpretation of the utterance by the addressee, Paula:

\[
\text{Step 1: Conceives (Paula, } <^p_{\text{i likes}}, \eta, ^p_n\text{self}, \text{likes'} (\chi_1, \text{Paula})\>)
\]

\[
\text{Step 2: Conceives (Paula, } <^p_{\text{i likes}}, ^p_n\text{Mirjam}, ^p_n\text{self}, \text{likes'} (\text{Mirjam, Paula})\>)
\]
Since the translation function in the first step does not provide a value for the first person pronoun for other interpreters than the designated self-ascribers, i.e., the speaker of the utterance, Paula being the addressee has to solve the relevant value of the remaining variable that is introduced by the first person pronoun uttered by Mirjam. This is done in the second step by building a model of the self-ascriber’s mental state, so that I uttered by a speaker (in this case Mirjam) is interpreted by somebody else (in this case Paula) as referring to the speaker, that is, Mirjam.

The same mechanism of self-ascription is applied by the speaker when uttering I. The first person pronoun I is defined as follows (Wechsler 2010: 348), in which S is the set of speakers:

\[
(29) \quad \text{Translation of I:} \\
\forall x \in S[V(<x, [I]^{SA}>) = x^{self}; \ \forall x \not\in S[V(<x, [you]^{SA}>) \text{ is undefined}]
\]

Thus, when we take Mirjam’s perspective as the speaker of the utterance, instead of Paula’s, the addressee in (28), we get the opposite result (Wechsler 2010: 349):

\[
(30) \quad \text{Mirjam speaking to Paula: [I like you]}
\]

Interpretation of the utterance by the speaker, Mirjam:

Step 1: Conceives (Mirjam, \(<^m_{\text{likes}}, m_{self}, \eta, >, \text{likes'} (\text{Mirjam, } \chi_{2i})>)

Step 2: Conceives (Mirjam, \(<^m_{\text{likes}}, m_{self}, m_{Paula} >, \text{likes'} (\text{Mirjam, Paula})>)

For Mirjam, the speaker, the translation function in the first step provides a value for the first person pronoun, but not for the second person pronoun in the first step. This is done in the second step by building a model of the addressee’s mental state, so that you is interpreted as referring to the addressee by the speaker.

---

\[6\] We believe that the set of speakers is always a singleton set, following de Schepper (2013), since an utterance cannot have more than one speaker. When two speakers say the same sentence simultaneously (Wechsler’s idea of ‘multiple speakers’), there are more utterances, and each utterance has only one speaker.
A similar process will take place for the second person pronoun when it has to be interpreted by somebody else than the designated self-ascriber, that is, somebody else than the addressee. We can embed the example presented in (28) and (30) in a context where Hans overhears the conversation between Mirjam and Paula, as in (31):

(31) Hans hears Mirjam say to Paula: [I like you]

Interpretation of the utterance by a non-speaker and a non-addressee, Hans:

Step 1: Conceives (Hans, \( \langle h_{l_{\text{likes}}}, n_{\text{Mirjam}}, n_{\text{Paula}} \rangle \), \( \text{likes}^\prime \) (Mirjam, Paula))

Step 2: Conceives (Hans, \( \langle h_{l_{\text{likes}}}, n_{\text{Mirjam}}, n_{\text{Paula}} \rangle \), \( \text{likes}^\prime \) (Mirjam, Paula))

Hans interprets the second person pronoun \( \text{you} \) without the mechanism of self-ascription, because he is not the addressee (the addressee of Mirjam’s utterance is Paula). Hans has to take the mental perspective of the speaker, Mirjam, in order to understand that \( \text{i} \) is self-ascribed by Mirjam and thus refers to Mirjam, and the perspective of Paula, the addressee, in order to understand that \( \text{you} \) is self-ascribed by Paula, and thus refers to Paula, in the overheard utterance.

Wechsler (2010) thus proposes that the interpretation of pronouns referring to speech-act participants takes place via self-ascription, where “[t]he phrase self-ascription includes direct pronoun interpretation by its self-ascriber (speaker for first person, addressee for second person), as provided by the translation function, as well as indirect pronoun interpretation by a non-self-ascriber, who makes an inference from another interlocutors’ self-ascription” (Wechsler 2010: 349). By proposing that \( \text{i} \) and \( \text{you} \) involve self-ascription by the speaker who produces \( \text{i} \) and the addressee who interprets \( \text{you} \), respectively, Wechsler (2010) can explain findings from language acquisition that show early production of first person pronouns and early comprehension of second person pronouns (both cases of direct pronoun interpretation), with the other combinations occurring only later.

Note that in (27)-(31) \( \text{you} \) gets a deictic interpretation: if it is interpreted by the addressee, it is interpreted via self-ascription, and if it is interpreted by somebody who is not the addressee, it is interpreted as referring to the addressee via the building of a mental model of the addressee. However, in this paper we have seen that in almost half of the cases the
second person pronoun does not get a deictic (addressee-referring) but a generic interpretation. In those cases the addressee should not interpret you via self-ascription. This is a problem for Wechsler’s (2010) definition in (26) above, which states that addressees always interpret you via self-ascription. In case of generic you this would lead to the wrong interpretation. A clear illustration is found in the interpretation of you in (32), taken from van der Auwera et al (to appear):

(32) In the Middle Ages you married young

Although Wechsler (2010) does not discuss the generic use of second person pronouns, we believe we can use his analysis to explain the idea of empathy-tracking that has been reported for the generic use of second person pronouns in comparison to third person pronouns (cf. Malamud 2012). We assume that addressees self-ascribe whenever they interpret a second person pronoun addressed to them (so not in a context like in (29) above, where the second person pronoun is interpreted by somebody who is not the addressee of the utterance), even when eventually the second person pronoun receives a generic reading and does not refer to the addressee.⁷ De Schepper (2013) argues that the identities of the speaker and the addressee(s) are always fixed at the beginning of the sentence, while the identity of others is not. Because the identity of the speaker and the addressee is already fixed at the beginning of the sentence, the content of the sentence cannot influence or change who is the speaker or the addressee. What can be influenced by the content of the sentence, however, is whether the second person pronoun gets a deictic or a generic interpretation. We assume, following Wechsler (2010), that a second person pronoun is necessarily interpreted by every addressee via self-ascription. When the second person pronoun gets a generic reading, the addressee remains the addressee, but they shift their interpretation of the pronoun. We have seen that this often happens when the context and/or the content of the utterance make clear that a generic reading was intended by the speaker. The process of self-ascription still takes place, but is overruled by the context in which you is used. We believe that the mechanism of interpretation via self-ascription before this interpretation is cancelled in favor of a generic interpretation explains the effect

⁷ We thank Thijs Trompenaars (p.c.) for suggesting this option to us.
of arousing empathy in the addressee when a second person pronoun is used with generic reference. We assume, following an idea of Thijs Trompenaars (p.c.), that you as a lexical item is interpreted by the addressee in isolation (as a lexical item) before it gets an integrated interpretation in context. Thus, we hypothesize that addressees (very briefly) interpret you via self-ascription before they shift to a generic interpretation triggered by the linguistic context. Two constraints are activated at this point, Wechsler’s (2010) constraint of self-ascription, as reformulated in (33), and a very general constraint that requires the interpretation of a lexical item to fit within the context, taken from Hogeweg (2009) and Zwarts (2004):

(33) **SELF-ASCRITION**: The second person pronoun you is interpreted by an addressee via self-ascription.
(34) **FIT**: Interpretations should not conflict with the (linguistic) context.

This process of arriving at the optimal interpretation of generic you in context can be illustrated in an Optimality Theoretic semantic tableau (Hogeweg 2009, Hendriks and de Hoop 2001, Smolensky and Legendre 2006). In this tableau we distinguish two stages, the first stage in which the addressee interprets you without taking into account the context, and the second stage in which the context is taken into account in interpreting you.\(^8\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addressee’s interpretation of you without further context</th>
<th>FIT</th>
<th>SELF-ASCRIBE</th>
<th>Addressee’s interpretation of you in a context that triggers a generic reading</th>
<th>FIT</th>
<th>SELF-ASCRIBE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>deictic</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>deictic</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>generic</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>generic</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tableau: Optimization of the addressee’s interpretation of you in two stages

Clearly, this tableau only illustrates the general idea of the interpretation process leading to either of the two interpretations, without further details on the exact reading that is arrived at and the exact context triggering it. In this paper we have only distinguished between two

---

\(^8\) Thanks to Lotte Hogeweg for her help in modeling the process of optimizing the interpretation of the second person pronoun in context.
global contexts that affect the reading of a second person pronoun, declaratives versus questions, but even though this effect turned out to be highly significant, a simple distinction between declaratives and questions is by no means sufficient to predict the outcome of the interpretation process. Recall that second person pronouns may receive deictic interpretations in declarative contexts and generic interpretations in questions as well. The constraint Fit is formulated too generally, and the input simply stipulates whether a certain reading is or is not triggered in the context. A detailed analysis as to which syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic factors exactly determine the reading of a second person pronoun in a certain context is however outside the intended scope of this paper.

When you is used for speaker-reference, which we have claimed to be an instantiation of generic reference, we cannot only explain the empathy-effect induced by the use of a second person pronoun, but also the distancing effect, discussed in Section 2, of not using a first person pronoun. The speaker who uses a generic pronoun instead of I does not have to self-ascribe anymore. This use of a generic pronoun thus creates a distant interpretation which can be convenient if the speaker is ashamed, or does not wish to sound arrogant. Note that this latter effect does not only arise when a second person impersonal pronoun is used for speaker-reference, but also when a third person impersonal pronoun is used.

Generic reference of you includes impersonal reference, that is, to people in general, as well as reference to a contextually restricted set of people. Also, it can have an even more specific reference to the speaker or to a specific third person (or group of persons). In all cases in which the second person pronoun is interpreted by the addressee, the pronoun triggers self-ascription (cf. Wechsler 2010), even if this interpretation is overruled in the end by stronger features coming from the linguistic and extra-linguistic context (cf. Hogeweg 2009). We assume that it is this process of self-ascription that is activated in the first phase of interpretation, which accounts for the empathy-evoking effect of the generic second person pronoun (cf. Malamud 2012).

The empathy-evoking effect of speakers referring to themselves by using a second person pronoun is reminiscent of the effect of identification that readers appear to experience when a narrator of a literary story uses a second person pronoun to refer to themselves or
to a character in the story. Ryan (2001: 138) describes this effect as follows: “Despite their different references, all of these uses [of second person pronouns] play on our instinctive reaction to think me when we hear you, and to feel personally concerned by the textual utterance.” Ryan (2001: 138) links this mechanism to the process of identification, which we consider to be the process of self-ascription: “Even when it refers to a well-individuated character in the textual world, the pronoun you retains the power to hook the attention of the reader and to force at least a temporary identification with the implied reference.” Thus, by its direct appeal to the reader via the mechanism of self-ascription, the use of a second person pronoun may evoke a higher level of identification with a narrator/character in a story than for example a first person pronoun would. This hypothesis was put to a test by Andeweg et al (to appear) in a small perception experiment, carried out in Nijmegen. For this purpose a writer of literary stories wrote a short (one page) story in which the main character commits a crime at the end of the story. There were two versions of the story, one with a first person and one with a second person narrator/main character. After reading one version of the story, subjects were asked to answer some questions about whether they were ‘taken away’ by the story, to what degree they identified with the main character, whether they felt that they experienced what the main character experienced, and to what degree they felt empathy for the main character. It turned out that the use of second person had a significant effect on the degree of identification with the main character, such that readers of the second person story indicated a higher degree of identification with the character, even though the difference in person had no effect on the level of empathy they experienced.

6. Conclusions

The second person pronoun in Dutch can receive deictic reference (referring to the addressee) or generic reference (referring generically, or specifically to first or third person). The two readings arise more or less equally often in Dutch as was shown on the basis of a subcorpus of 1% of the occurrences of you in the Spoken Dutch Corpus (CGN). We expected addressees to be able to distinguish between these two readings on the basis of context: generic readings will be more frequent in descriptive language and deictic readings will be more frequent in interactive contexts. The reason generic readings are more prevalent in
descriptive language is that speakers usually do not have information about addressees that the addressees do not have themselves. Deictic readings are more frequent in interactive contexts as speakers want something from their interlocutors, such as information or an action. Under the assumption that declarative sentences are prototypically used descriptively while questions are prototypically used interactively, we did a follow-up study in which we measured the effect of sentence type (declarative or question) on type of reading (generic or deictic). Our prediction was borne out. This effect turned out to be highly significant. While context thus serves to guide the addressee to the right interpretation, the second person pronoun initially receives the deictic reading, which refers to the addressee. The addressee obtains this reading via self-ascription, even if this reading eventually loses against the generic reading of the pronoun when it is interpreted in context. This mechanism of self-ascription can be used to explain the empathy-evoking effect of a generic second person pronoun as reported in the literature.

Authors’ addresses:

HELEN DE HOOP
Department of Linguistics
Radboud University Nijmegen
P.O. Box 9103
6500 HD Nijmegen
The Netherlands
E-mail: H.deHoop@let.ru.nl

SAMMIE TARENSKEEN
Department of Philosophy
Radboud University Nijmegen
P.O. Box 9103
6500 HD Nijmegen
The Netherlands
E-mail: s.tarenskeen@gmail.com
Acknowledgements

The research presented here was financially supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (grant 360-70-313), which is gratefully acknowledged. We would like to thank Hans Hoeken, Lotte Hogeweg, Johan Kobben, Sander Lestrade, Vera van Mulken, Nelleke Oostdijk, José Sanders, Kees de Schepper, Wessel Stoop, and Martine Zwets for helpful comments and advice, Johan Kobben and Vera van Mulken for their translations of the Dutch fragments, and Wessel Stoop for annotating part of the data.

References


Andeweg, Sebastiaan, Rianne Hendrix, Vera van ’t Hoff, & Helen de Hoop (to appear), En dan vermoord je hem... Over de invloed van grammaticale persoon op identificatie. Neerlandistiek.nl: 2013.


van der Auwera, Johan, Volker Gast, & Jeroen Vanderbiesen (to appear), Human impersonal pronoun uses in English, Dutch and German. Leuvense Bijdragen.

Bolinger, Dwight (1979), To catch a metaphor: you as norm. American Speech 54: 194-209.


Foolen, Ad & Helen de Hoop (2009), Conflicting constraints on the interpretation of modal auxiliaries. In: L. Hogeweg, H. de Hoop & A. Malchukov (Eds.), Cross-linguistic
Amsterdam/Philadelphia.


Amsterdam/Philadelphia. 209-231.


Sun, Jackson T.-S. (2005), Linguistic coding of generic human arguments in rGyalrongic languages. Paper presented at the 11th Himalayan Languages Symposium, December 6-8, Chualalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.


Zeijlstra, Hedde (2011), Let’s talk about you and me. Unpublished MS.