

Stuart CUNNINGHAM

Any proposition can be subject to a challenge and the preference is to avoid challenges by pre-empting them. One way to avoid a challenge is to place the proposition within the category of ‘a widely known fact’ or as ‘obvious’. The use of pronouns can play an important, and very subtle role in this strategy. This paper looks at how the impersonal ‘you’, and ‘we’ are used as tools to place speaker propositions within the categories of ‘a widely known fact’, or ‘obvious’.

Speakers can gain support for their propositions by presenting their proposition as existing in the realm of common knowledge/obviousness (see Bednarek, 2007; Halliday & Hasan, 1976). One way of doing this is adopting the perspective that the proposition is one that would be held by reasonable people. This can be achieved through the use of pronouns. Myers and Lampropoulou (2012) note the use of the ‘Impersonal *you*’ (similar to the French *on*) as being able to position an experience as shared, or a viewpoint as commonplace.

ANALYSIS

This next section will examine how the use of pronouns is used as a means of stance-taking in a focus group discussion. The pronouns can be seen to exist on a spectrum from highly subjective, e.g., I, to shared within limits e.g., we, to a more generalized, impersonal *you*. These uses of pronouns can be seen not merely as single examples that require limited context, but rather, as part of the ebb and flow of stance-taking in spoken conversation that develops over time.

Example 1 is taken from a focus group discussing student autonomy in the SLA classroom. The example begins with Dave responding to the question “How do you react to students who display evidence of autonomous learning?”

Example 1

Dave: I give like everybody the opportunity and you can see which ones are doing it and making the effort and follow through with it, as an observer of a classroom, we know which kids are doing, it paying attention to your students you know which ones are doing it.

Alan: But especially when you start giving directions and you see that the two types of student the ones that shake their heads like uh huh uh huh and they just wanna look like they know what you are doing or what you're saying and then there's the one that they get what you're saying and then as your class is going it goes and then you notice those types of student really take off and they get like what Dave says. So, I don't know, trying to identify one student, maybe you've got an idea of just how they interact at the beginning of things and then as you promote opportunities for them to expand and do their learning whether speaking or reading or writing. It just kinda takes off and, I don't know, to me, it just seems like it becomes easier for them towards the end of the semester because maybe they're just not sure they're not confident if you give them opportunities to continue outside of class then we see them, I don't even, plateau just, I don't know. I just see it becomes easier for them in their learning and they're the ones that, oh well, I really enjoyed this cos of like this and this and this and this. So if I am understanding the question correctly.

Dave begins with “I” but, seven words later, he has transferred to the impersonal *you*. Here, he is asserting that it is possible to discern the students that are “making an effort”. This ‘you’ is then explained as being an observer of a classroom (it is noticeable here that Dave refers to being an observer of *a* classroom and not as observer of *the* classroom. His choice of articles here adds to the generalizability of his conclusions). This transition from “I” to “*you*”, coupled with “everybody”, “which ones are doing it and making the effort”, “kids”, and “your students” clearly establishes the categories of teacher and student. The category of teacher has been represented most recently by “you”, “we”, and your”. Alan takes over as speaker. The options available to him at this point are, (a) begin afresh, as Dave did, transitioning from “I” into the “we” and impersonal *you* that represents all teachers, (b) reject the right to represent all teachers by only using “I”, or (c) accept Dave’s use of “we” and the impersonal *you*. Alan accepts the epistemic right to represent all teachers and adopts the impersonal *you*. Furthermore, Alan assumes the right to subdivide the category of student into two subcategories; the students who know what the teacher wants and those who do not really. This is what Bednarek (2006) calls *mindsay*, which is when a speaker gives voice to the thoughts of another person, in the same way that hearsay is a speaker giving voice to the words of another person (of course, such an utterance is clearly the work of conjecture but is a common practice

nevertheless). Next, Alan states how improvement in students is noticed by using the impersonal *you*. By using the impersonal *you*, Alan is both aligning with Dave's implicit assertion that the participants are able to make statements on behalf of all teachers, and also using the verb *notice* as an indication of how he gained access to the knowledge. This represents a co-construction by two participants of (i) their epistemic right to make assertions, (ii) to make those assertions as if they were generalizable to all teaching scenarios, and (iii) that their *seeing* and *noticing* is an acceptable source for making such assertions. Alan begins a change in his epistemological positioning. Here he begins to display doubt as to his assertions with phrases (*I don't know*), adverbs of reliability (*maybe*), frequent use of *just*, and, most noticeably, a shift from an objective perspective (impersonal *you*, or *we*) to a distinctly more subjective perspective (I).

Example 2

Example 2 is taken from a focus group discussing the pros and cons of Kobe as a city for non-Japanese people to live in long-term. The excerpt begins with Alan explaining why he prefers Kobe to bigger cities.

Example 2

Alan: *See in the big cities, like Tokyo and Nagoya, You can see a lot of things but they're all far away so half your day is maybe transport. I mean even Kyoto sometimes*

Ben: (Points at Alan) *Yeah*

Alan: *To get from one to the other it takes you nearly 1 and a half hours in traffic*

Carol: *No, I think Kobe is much more convenient*

Ben: *Kobe has a lot to offer*

Carol: *I think so, food, people, comfort, yeah, accessibility*

Alan: *You've got the Chinatown, India town*

Carol: *And we've got the Shin Kobe Shinkansen, which is also nice*

Alan: *Yeah, oh Shinkansen station, nowadays nearly every train stops at Kobe whereas (waves hand)*

Carol: *and we have Kobe airport*

Alan: *Yeah*

Carol: *Right? We have the airport*

Alan's second sentence uses the impersonal *you*, and is followed by the construction of an evaluative class; *they* refers to *a lot of things* and these things are all far away, and the consequence of this is half your day is taken up travelling rather than sightseeing. This is therefore a

negative appraisal of this evaluative class. Ben emphatically agrees with Alan through a verbal agreement and a gesture (pointing). Alan continues with a statement using the impersonal *you*. Thus far, Alan and Ben have co-constructed a generalized picture of Tokyo and Nagoya as being cities that a reasonable person would expect to take a lot of time to travel around. Carol then says “No”, which serves not to disagree but rather to agree with Alan and Ben, but this “No” is followed by a shift from the generalized opinion of Ben and Alan to the subjective opinion of Carol. Ben then uses a non-sourced averral and Carol agrees explicitly by adding a list of four positive qualities, but again, using the subjective “I”. Alan continues with the impersonal *you* when listing two more positive qualities. At this point Carol shifts from a subjective “I” to “we”. Clearly, this is not intended to be set in contrast to the prior statement as her utterance begins with “and”, thus implying alignment. Alan supports the importance of Carol’s statement by saying that trains stop frequently at Shin-Kobe (the bullet train station serving Kobe) unlike an unmentioned time before. Carol continues to reject the impersonal *you*, yet has moved away from her highly subjective “I” and finishes with “we”.

DISCUSSION

Bednarek (2006, 2007) asserts that one type of information source is that of common knowledge/obviousness, although, her assertion is only concerned with the discourse of newspapers. However, examples 1 and 2 above show that spoken discourse also utilizes the common knowledge/obviousness source. By using the impersonal *you* the speaker is able to place their claim as being a non-subjective claim to which any *reasonable* person would acquiesce. At this point, interlocutors have two options to align with the speaker (should they so wish). Firstly, they can adopt the use of the impersonal *you*, as seen with Alan in Example 1. Secondly, they can align with the assertion of the previous speaker while maintaining a subjective basis for doing so in the use of “I”, as seen in Example 2 with Carol.

When a speaker asserts that certain knowledge is in the field of common knowledge/obviousness, then pressure to align with such a claim has been brought to bear upon other participants. The participants could refuse to align with the claim of common knowledge/obviousness or challenge the claim, in which case there will be a necessity to perform facework. In Example 1, Alan gradually distances himself from the certainty of Dave through the use of a number of mitigating strategies (“maybe”, “I don’t know”, and moving away from the impersonal *you* back to me as in “it just seems to me”). This could be seen as Alan working to disalign from Dave, but disaligning not with

the claim but with the certainty of the claim. By moving back into a more subjective perspective, Alan is able to distance himself from the stance taken by Dave without actually having to challenge Dave's assertion.

These two examples above show a difference between stance-taking in newspapers and stance-taking in spoken discourse. Spoken discourse has more room for fluid stance-taking. Participants can align, disalign, and partially align with each other. Stance is constructed *in situ* and this requires sensitivity to this ongoing process. This is in contrast to written discourse (except written dialogues) that requires the writer to have a pre-planned stance; indeed, the purpose of newspapers could be said to be the exposition of a pre-planned stance.

Much stance-taking can be seen to function along the various clines suggested by Bednarek (2007), e.g., general – specific, certain – uncertain, implicit evaluation – explicit evaluation. Furthermore, stance is taken with regard to a proposition, e.g., a teacher can see if a student is making effort, Kobe is preferable as it is more compact than Tokyo or Nagoya. These two planes of discourse, stance and proposition, offer participants in spoken language a way to disalign with a speaker without causing a complicated need for face-saving work. Speaker A can align with the proposition of Speaker B but not align with the stance taken towards that proposition. The use of expressions such as “like”, “kinda” and “sorta” are built into spoken discourse, not necessarily due to an innate inability to accurately construct a proposition, but as a means of creating wiggle-room on the part of participants. If a speaker voices belief in a proposition and leaves a certain degree of wiggle-room then other participants are free to present their disalignment as addendums to the stance that has been taken and not as corrections of the proposition itself. It may be that the proposition has hierarchical status over stance and that facework has hierarchical status over epistemic advancement. Certainly, the data produced by this pilot study cannot support such a conclusion, but it does seem to invite the question.

CONCLUSION

This research supports the idea that pronouns play a part in stance-taking (Myers and Lampropoulou, 2012). It also adds to research by showing that pronouns play a role in aligning or disaligning with a speaker. A speaker can use the impersonal *you* to suggest that their proposition is reasonable, as it is drawn, not from a personal/subjective interpretation of the world, but from an interpretation that is shared by so many people that it has become normalized. Should the next speaker want to disalign from the preceding utterance, without risking face loss for the previous speaker, they can shift the pronoun into the subjective

'I'. This strategy mitigates the disagreement by implying that the new speaker has an alternative proposition that is:

- a) A subjective interpretation
- b) That is a parallel interpretation
- c) That it is not in opposition to the previous interpretation.

REFERENCES

- Bednarek, M. (2006). Epistemological positioning and evidentiality in English news discourse: A text-driven approach. *Text & Talk*, 26(6), 635-660.
- Bednarek, M. (2007). *Evaluation in media discourse: Analysis of a newspaper corpus*. New York: Continuum.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
- Myers, G. & Lampropoulou, S. (2012). Impersonal you and stance-taking in social research interviews. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44(10), 1206-1218.