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Impersonal *you* and stance-taking in social research interviews

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Abstract

The pronoun *you* is prototypically used to refer to the addressee or addressees in an interaction, but it also has other uses, including a kind of impersonal reference that does not pick out any particular person, but is the equivalent of *someone*, *anyone*, or *one*.

This paper focuses on how the shift to impersonal *you* works in one genre of interaction, research interviews by academic social science researchers, where the participants often use *you* where the previous turn might have projected the use of *I* or *they*. We argue that the shift, and related cues of the dimension of specific vs. general, can be seen as a form of stance-taking. We explore three possible functions: 1) recategorising of the speaker and their category-associated experiences, 2) displaying perceptions as shared, not merely individual, and 3) invoking commonplaces to deal with dilemmas posed by the question. These rhetorical actions can be related to the demands of the research interview, with the interviewee claiming or disclaiming an entitlement to have a

stance, supporting their stances against possible challenge, and giving accounts or resisting judgments of the interviewee's behavior or views. Attention to these shifts can make social science researchers more aware of the interactions underlying the transcripts.

Keywords: impersonal pronouns, stance-taking, interviews, categorization, argument, commonplaces

1. Introduction

The pronoun *you* is used most commonly in singular or plural to refer to the interlocutor, or to a group to which the interlocutor belongs. But it has other uses too, as noted in a reference grammar of English: "A particular problem with the use of *you* is that it may refer to people in general, including the speaker/writer" (Biber et al., 1999: 330). The problem is even more complex than this grammar suggests, because reference is not simply to "people in general"; as Siewierska (2008) points out, impersonals may refer to no one, to a vague referent, or to a particular referent whose identity is not known.

Drawing on both grammatical and interactional approaches to impersonal pronouns, we consider the uses of impersonal *you* in a corpus of social science research interviews.

The interviews we study are interactions conducted for the purposes of qualitative social

science research, in which one participant is an academic researcher or their research assistant and the other is someone with knowledge or experience or views on the social process being researched. Our study complements the perceptive analysis by Stirling and Manderson (2011) of *you* in one interview, by considering a wider range of interviews, and placing the interviewees' acts in the framework of stance-taking.

In Example 1, from a passage we will discuss in more detail later, the interviewer is working for a project researching changes in women's attitudes towards health from one generation to the next, and the interviewee is talking about their experience of the health system. Uses of impersonal *you* are coded in bold. (The transcription, including the ellipses, is that of the original health studies researchers, the late Mildred Blaxter and her team (Blaxter and Paterson, 1982). We discuss the issue of transcription in section 3).

Example 1a: 4943int07

it's always been something straightforward that didn't, you know, it just ended
when **you** got it done, or they treated **you** and **you** went home...

As we will see, / might be expected in this context, but the interviewee uses impersonal *you*, to talk about what typically happened ("it just ended when you got it done"), rather than just one treatment that happened to her.

Our approach starts with what other studies have shown about the grammar and interactional uses of impersonal *you*, applies these insights to research interviews, and

considers the use of impersonal *you* as stance-taking. We address the following questions:

1. What resources does the use of impersonal *you*, and the move from specific to more general, provide for interviewees?
2. How are these resources used in the genre context of the social research interview?
3. How are interviewees' uses of these resources related to interviewers' questions and follow-ups?

We will first review three relevant bodies of literature: approaches to pronouns in discourse, studies of stance-taking, and analysis of interviews as interaction. We will introduce our data source and methods, and in our analysis we will consider in detail three actions performed in the shift to *you*: categorising people and actions, presenting perceptions and experiences as shared, and invoking commonplaces. Then we will review possible rhetorical functions of these actions in the institutionalised genre of the research interview.

2. Two approaches to impersonal pronouns in discourse

The reference of impersonal pronouns has been addressed from different angles by grammarians, sociolinguists, and conversation analysts. For grammarians, impersonal pronouns are just one way of expressing an impersonal meaning; Siewierska (2008a,

2008b) discusses how they fit within a wider range of constructions including passives and existential constructions. Among these constructions, we are particularly interested in impersonal *you* because it is frequent in our data, and it is a prototypically personal expression that can be given an impersonal meaning, so it is a very common marker of shifts from specific to general.

Laberge and Sankoff (1979), discussing indefinite pronouns in Montreal French, propose a useful division of impersonal *you* into two functional categories; “situational insertion” and “truisms or morals” (429). In situational insertion, the speaker “assimilates himself to a much wider class of people, downgrading his own experience to incidental status in the discourse, phrasing it as something that could or would be anybody’s” (429). “Truisms and morals” are statements of generally accepted rules of conduct; they are similar to situational insertion in generalizing, but “morals constitute a kind of reflection on conventional wisdom, whereas ‘situational insertion’ seems to be an attempt to elevate particular ideas and experiences to that state . . . Morals, then, are like situational insertion, only more so” (429). Laberge and Sankoff, like other researchers, link the shift in pronoun to other shifts; often the generality of a truism is signaled by a change from the past tense of narrative to the present tense of knowledge statements (424).

Kitigawa and Lehrer (1990) draw on the categories of Laberge and Sankoff in their analysis of impersonal pronouns in various news stories and narratives. They add

the category “Life Drama”, a way of setting up narratives. We do not find this in our data, and neither Ushie (1994) nor Stirling and Manderson (2011) found it in their interview data, so it may be specific to some kinds of conversation. Kitigawa and Lehrer draw on a distinction made by Goldsmith and Woisetschlaeger (1982) in studies of the use of the progressive aspect, between statements of phenomenological instances and statements of structural knowledge. Goldsmith and Woisetschlaeger introduce this distinction to account for the use of progressive aspect in some instances (structural knowledge) and simple past in others (phenomenological instances). Kitigawa and Lehrer argue that the same distinction can be made with the use of impersonal pronouns: *I* can give a sense that the speaker is reporting what they experienced or perceived, while impersonal *you* can give a sense of structural knowledge so that that the listener or anyone is inside the experience. We can illustrate their distinction with an example from our data. Just before the passage quoted in Example 1, the interviewee had said “I had a broken finger”; this is a phenomenological instance; it presents the experience as an observable fact in that one instance, from the outside. “They treated you and you went home”, quoted in Example 1, suggests structural knowledge, from the inside, of how things generally occur.

The studies cited so far approach impersonal pronouns in grammatical terms; they arrive at categories based on what constructions are used and semantic concepts such as quantification. Harvey Sacks, in his *Lectures on Conversation* (1992)

repeatedly returns to *you* as an example of “tying rules” in conversation, the way the referent of an expression is tied to referents in a previous turn. One famous example of tying using a pronoun will show how his approach to morals, truisms, and commonplaces differs from those of Kitigawa and Lehrer:

The openness of the plural “you” means that “you” can in fact be a way of talking about “everybody” – and indeed, incidentally, of “me” . . . And those differences are extremely carefully focused on by speakers. I have a lot of very subtle usages which turn on these differences; for example a woman is asked “Why do you want to kill yourself” and she says “Well, you just want to see if anyone cares.” Now that use of “you” in this case surely refers to her, but her as a member of “anybody”, and thereby provides that it is only incidentally her reason, but it’s anybody’s reason, and thereby is not attackable as peculiar. It is offered as proverbially correct. (1992, Vol. I: 166, also Vol. I: 349)

Sacks arrives at insights into the ambiguity of the pronoun that are similar to those of Laberge and Sankoff and of Kitigawa and Lehrer, but through a very different route, focusing on what they mean for the participants in this exchange, as they tie one turn to the previous turn. In his example, the potential suicide is assimilating herself to a larger group of “anyone”; she is recategorising herself, showing she is not “peculiar”. Different entitlements to speak go with these different categories of people; in this case, a member of the category of “potential suicide” may be required to say why she wants to

kill herself, while a member of the general category “anybody”, acting and feeling in accordance with that category, need not give any explanations. She is also changing her relation to the other speaker emphasising what, she suggests, everybody shares rather than what makes them different as caller and advisor on a help line. She is also dealing with the question; what she says is, for present purposes, enough.

3. Interaction in interviews

We are particularly interested in the work the impersonal *you* does in a specific genre of interaction, the social research interview. Several pragmatic studies of impersonal pronouns (e.g., Yule, 1982; Ushie, 1994; Flores-Ferrán, 2009) use one form or another of interview as a source of data on language use in general, without commenting on what their findings tell us about interviews as a genre. It is not surprising that interviews provide a good source for these studies; research interviews typically question an individual as a member of a category (such as patients, homeless people, people with mental illnesses, young males). There have been a number of analyses recently of interviews as interaction (recent reviews include Rapley, 2001; Rapley, 2004; Potter and Hepburn, 2005; Roulston, 2006; Wooffitt and Widdicombe, 2006; Abell and Myers, 2008; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Roulston, 2010; de Fina and Perrino, 2011; Mann, 2011; Talmy and Richards, 2011). For our analysis, we follow this line of discourse studies of research interviews in that 1) the interviewee’s turn is understood in relation to the interviewer’s previous turn, 2) interviewee’s response is seen as a social action,

not just as an expression of their internal state, and 3) both the interviewer and the interviewee orient to conventional understanding of the purpose and conduct of interviews.

Recently Stirling and Manderson (2011) have done a fine-grained analysis of the use of impersonal *you*, in a discourse context that does address the interview as a genre. They focus on one interview in a medical anthropology project with a woman who had breast cancer, retranscribing the interview for conversation analysis. They see the use of *you* as a form of membership categorisation with three functions, interactional, identify-framing, and epistemic, and focus on what these shifts mean in a narration of personal experience. Our analysis is similar to theirs but complements their work; in our wider range of data, membership categorisation is one of several devices, and narration of personal experience is only one possible context. We will cite some of the more detailed insights from this study in our analysis.

Our study considers the role of interviewees' choices in moment to turn by turn control of the direction of the interaction. In interviews, whether for broadcast, or doctor-patient encounters, or employment, or research, one party typically asks questions and the other produces turns offered as responses, so they would seem to be interviews in which the interviewer had unambiguous control. Recent work on questions and answers (Raymond, 2003; Fox and Thompson, 2010; Freed and Erlich, 2010; Heritage, 2010) has shown several ways in which the form of turn used by an interviewer or other

professional can shape interviewee responses. It can set an agenda, for instance by determining expected topic and approach, build presuppositions into the question, convey the epistemic stance of the questioner, for instance suggesting knowledge or doubt about statements, and frame one or another response as preferred (Heritage 2010). We will argue that a shift from personal to impersonal reference can be one way of challenging these expectations.

4. Stance, specificity and generality

Any shift in pronoun use can be seen as stance-taking, altering the relation between speaker, interlocutor, and object. DuBois stresses that stance is not just a grammatical category, but an interactional act.

Stance is a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimensions of the sociocultural field (DuBois, 2007: 163).

Usually stance-taking is seen in terms of evaluation, evidentiality, or affect, but Berman, Ragnarsdóttir and Strömqvist (2002) argue that the dimension of specific vs. general is also a dimension of stance. To present an event in more general terms, not as happening once to one person, but as happening generally to a category of people,

changes the interlocutor's interpretation of that event, even if the evaluation, evidence, or affect is the same.

Studies of impersonal *you* often include a category of generally-accepted statement, which we treat as one form of stance-taking. Both Laberge and Sankoff (1979) and Kitigawa and Lehrer (1990) categorise some uses of impersonal *you* as morals and truisms, and Sacks refers to a statement offered as "proverbially correct". We will draw on the term from classical rhetoric of *commonplace*, "general argument, observation, or description a speaker could memorise for use on any number of possible occasions" (Lanham, 1968: 110). A commonplace has two dimensions: 1) the linguistic form as formulaic language (Wray, 2002), as a general, present tense, idiomatic statement of a general truth, as in "you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs", and 2) the rhetorical function, its usefulness for speakers in interaction.

There are many possible indications of commonplaces; the impersonal *you* is just one. But the clearest indication is just that it is taken as a commonplace by the participants; when a speaker uses a commonplace, hearers typically recognise it as a statement of a general rule, not challenging it directly. The speaker of a commonplace draws, not on structural knowledge to which they have a claim based on their category or experience, but on a kind of "commonsense" (Shotter, 1993), a sense that has become common to and taken-for granted by people within a community. In our data we see commonplaces as situated responses to questions. They are often ways of dealing

with a rhetorical problem, for instance to avoid giving an account, losing face, criticising others, or claiming entitlement.

5. Data and Methods

We studied interview transcripts from eight research projects drawn from Qualidata, an on-line archive set up to enable wider access to qualitative data from publicly-funded academic social research projects in the United Kingdom. (All data are available, after registration, at <http://www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/>. For more background, see Thompson (2000) and Corti and Thompson (2004)). The archive includes some other forms of data, such as maps, focus group transcripts and participant diaries, but most of the data deposited are transcripts or interviews done by the investigators or their research assistants with people who are affected by or involved in the social issue they are studying. For the researchers, of course, these data are not the end-product of their work; they provide the raw material for their analysis, interpretation, and reports, usually in academic books and articles. The documentation accompanying files in the archive lists the interviews but does not usually give much background on the participants or the context.

We were conducting a broader study of stance-taking in interviews, and used Qualidata as our source because we wanted to develop descriptive and analytical approaches to stance-taking that could be used with typical, not re-transcribed, transcripts produced by academic social scientists. The advantage of this source is that

it gives us a range of different forms of interviews, not just those from research projects in which we have been involved ourselves, from different academic disciplines, and in a form of transcription recognisable to the practitioners. The full transcripts are available to anyone who reads our study.

As we have noted in our review of the literature, some studies of interaction have used interviews for which they had access to sound files, and have retranscribed those interviews in conversation analysis transcription (on this form of transcription, see Psathas and Anderson, 1990; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; Jefferson, 2004). Typical transcripts, regularised to approximate conventions of writing and playscripts foreclose some approaches to analysis (for discussions of transcription issues, see Ochs, 1979; Coates and Thornborrow, 1999; Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999; Bucholtz, 2000; O'Connell and Kowal, 2000; Oliver et al., 2005; Bucholtz, 2007; Hammersley, 2010; Skukauskaite, 2012). In the Qualidata transcripts, there is rarely any consistent transcription of pauses, overlaps, or other features. Transcribers often use such features as ellipses to suggest pauses or capitals to suggest stress, and a reliance on transcripts means putting some trust in their inconsistent but probably warranted judgment. But with these limitations, the transcripts still allow us to look at lexical and grammatical features (such as impersonal pronouns) in relation to turns before and after them. While we cannot provide as fine-grained an analysis as we could with more detailed transcription, we can still show the importance of turn by turn interaction in a way that can be used by the

social researchers who produce the transcripts, researchers for whom very detailed transcription is not a practical option.

From the hundreds of projects in the Qualidata archive, we selected eight for our study, not trying to represent social science research in general, but aiming for a wide range of disciplines and approaches. We excluded projects where there was more than one interviewee, where the transcription merely summarised responses, or where questions were mainly about facts. From each project, we chose two interviews, largely on the basis of length, to ensure comparability for another part of the study. Details about the projects used in this study are in Appendix 1; they include a range of disciplines, topics, and styles of interview. In two of the interviews we selected, impersonal *you* turns out to be relatively infrequent, but we kept those in our corpus so that we would be aware of the range of practices.

In this paper we have reproduced the transcripts as they appear in Qualidata, with whatever labels the researchers used for the participants, because to regularize them would be to conceal the other forms of variation in transcription. We have added turn numbers, have broken the interviewee's turn into one line for each clause for easier reference, and have used bold font to indicate impersonal uses of *you*.

Our analysis was a two-stage process of developing rhetorical categories of stance-taking from the existing functional categories of impersonal *you*. First, we coded all the interviewee instances of *you*, *your*, and *yours*, (1351 of them) starting with the

categories from Kitigawa and Lehrer (1990): 1) Situational Insertion and 2) Morals or Truisms. As we coded, we broke the larger categories down into sub-categories, including Situational Insertion in existential, habitual, and hypothetical uses, and Maxims used to express necessity, cultural conventions, and commonplaces. But these sub-categories did not amount to a new interpretation; they elaborated on characteristics of impersonal *you* that others have noted. Distinctions between the two main categories were generally clear; sub-categories were often unclear.

We also coded referential and discourse marker uses of *you*, but only to exclude them from the analysis. We are not considering referential uses of *you*, what Kitigawa and Lehrer (1990) call deictic uses, mostly the interviewer referring to the interviewee, as in “Do you think” or “Where did you live” or “How often do you . . .”. Occasionally the interviewee may use *you* to refer to someone else in the room, such as a child or husband, or to the interviewer. And there are many instances in reported speech, usually then referring unambiguously to the interviewee. (“He says “do you fancy getting married”). We also disregarded some common uses in phrases such as *you know* and *you see*, and in tags, since these occur very frequently in the course of first person responses without marking a shift of person, though of course we do consider them along with other tags as relevant context for the pronouns. With all these categories removed, we find that 22% of the uses of *you* or *your* in the corpus are impersonal *you* in interviewee turns. This proportion of instances of *you* that are impersonal rather than

referential, discourse markers, or reported speech varies widely between interviews, with a low of 6% impersonal *you* and a high of 49%. The variation may arise because of different topics, questions and styles of response, and we will return to these issues in our discussion.

In a second stage, we mapped these categories onto the kinds of interactional work the use of *you* was doing in the context of the interview. At this stage, we broadened our analysis beyond the turn, considering interviewee turns in relation to previous interviewer turns, and comparing uses across different projects. One set of uses clustered around interviewees making categorisations of people, especially self-categorisations in relation to their *entitlement* to speak on an issue. Another set clustered around using shared perceptions to support an *argument*, and one around using maxims to give *accounts* justifying actions. Of course these broader uses can overlap, but they lead us to look for different kinds of rhetorical actions within the general frame of stance-taking. These sets of rhetorical actions do not, of course, constitute a complete typology of all that participants could do with these shifts, in research interviews or in other genres of interaction. But we will argue in the analysis that follows that they provide a useful framework for relating the use of impersonal *you* and other forms of generalisation to the stance-taking actions that occur regularly and centrally in research interviews.

6. Analysis

6.1 Categorisation and entitlement

One effect of the impersonal *you* is to set up a more general set of circumstances that may or may not differ from that projected in the previous turn; as we have seen, Laberge and Sankoff call this effect of impersonal *you* “situational insertion” (1979). In setting up these more general circumstances, the interviewee may also be recategorising themselves in terms of a more general set of people. The impersonal *you* can function as one signal of a categorisation device (Hester and Eglin, 1997; Housley and Fitzgerald, 2002). This categorisation can then be offered to provide a response to an interview question, or a reason for not responding. Often the topic of the interview involves such institutions such as schools, workplaces, and hospitals, and the category is defined by the roles assigned by these institutions, as patient, client, or pupil, in relation to members of other categories, such as doctors, social workers, or teachers. But interviewees also have ways of presenting themselves as members of other categories, such as “anybody”. The use of impersonal *you* can suggest that many people, not just the interviewee, could tell the same story, have the same perception, or make the same judgment.

Let us return to look in more detail at the interaction in Example 1a.

Context: The project studies changes in women's attitudes towards health over generations. The interviewee, G8, was trained as a physician and now works in a medical laboratory. Eight turns earlier, the interviewer began this section with the question, "So you personally haven't seen any change in your doctor?" When the interviewee talked about changes she had seen in the laboratory, the interviewer characterised this response, "That's from a technical point of view" setting up an opposition of two kinds of possible views, "personal" and "technical". Then we get to the exchange that involves impersonal *you*.

Example 1b: 4943int07

1. LP: You haven't noticed, personally? From the point of view of any changes..?

2. GP:
 - a. Well, I don't know...

 - b. I've never been in hospital with anything particularly difficult,

 - c. or required a lot of nursing or,

 - d. it's always been something straightforward that didn't, you know,

 - e. it just ended when you got it done,

 - f. or they treated you

 - g. and you went home...

 - h. Quite easy to trace..

i. keep **you** in hospital for 24 hours, quite straightforward.

j. That's all I had a broken finger, and a hysterectomy . . . fairly straightforward [turn continues]

The shifts between personal and impersonal pronouns parallel shifts from specific to general experience of medical treatment. By drawing on this general distinction between different kinds of treatment, the interviewee categorises herself as someone unable to answer the question about changes in medicine. Examples of the impersonal *you* occur in lines e, f, g, and i, contrasting with the interviewee's use of /in b and j, and in previous turns. When she shifts to the impersonal *you*, she suggests that the experience of "something straightforward" is not just her experience, but describes a general category of patients and of experience that the interviewer will recognise ("you know"). When she shifts back to using /in line j, it is to list two specific medical conditions ("a broken finger, and a hysterectomy"), to minimise them ("that's all"), and to include them as examples of this category of "fairly straightforward".

In generalising her experience, the interviewee transforms the kind of answer projected by the question. She presents herself as unable to answer the question "personally" as asked because the conditions she has had are not by implication in the category of "particularly difficult" in which someone would experience the changes she wants to describe. This use of impersonal *you* can be analysed in the context of the other personalising and impersonalising features, such as making the cause of her

f. and **you** were like more or less a brain. You know.

g. Look at em now at 14.

h. What a change eh.

3. Interviewer Would your father give you a kiss and a cuddle?

The interviewee changes the agenda of the question, questioning its presupposition.

Her use of *we* rather than *I* and *them* rather than *he* (in a) signals that she will transform the projected personal response into a response about a broader group. Then she marks a reformulation, “I mean”, and offers a much more general statement about “then” and “nowadays” (b). The first *you* in “You’re brought up differently, aren’t you” (c) apparently refers, not to the speaker, but to people “nowadays”; she sets up a contrast that apparently applies to everyone in her generation and in a younger generation. The tag question (c) offers this contrast as knowledge shared with the interviewer, though it is not clear if she is included in the *you*. Ushie (1994) calls such uses “non-inclusive generic + non-egocentric”. So something about people in her generation in contrast to those nowadays is presented as supporting her assertion that “we never really had anything to confide”.

Another “I mean” (d) suggests that the following clauses constitute development of this statement about contrasting generations (Schiffrin, 1987). The impersonal *you* in e and f has a different referent from that in c, referring not to the current generation but to the speaker and to some but not all members of her generation; it is the same sort of

you that Ushie (1994) classifies as specific+egocentric. The rhetorical contrast is brought out by the parallelism between “you were 14” (e) and “look at em now at 14” (g). The “you know” in f is a discourse marker, and although we did not treat it as an impersonal *you*, it is relevant to interpreting the instances of impersonal *you* around it. Stirling and Manderson analyse a similar example of ‘you know’ in their data as referring to shared cultural knowledge in relation to the body (2011: 1589). It does not appear to have that function here; what the interviewer now knows is not what everybody knows, but what the interviewee has just told them about generational differences. The discourse marker serves to mark a transition as she goes back to the first part of the contrast (g). This contrast apparently is not enough to make her point, because she goes on to give a coda (h), suggesting the point of all this is to show “change”, with another tag, “eh”. After all this work to shift the agenda from her personal experience to the habitual or general experience of her generation, the interviewer returns with the next question on the schedule, again a personal question about her father (3). So the response is taken as usable, not in need of a follow-up, but the interviewee’s attempt at topic transformation from her experience to that of her generation is not taken up.

We have seen in these examples that the interviewee can take up the categorisations projected by the interviewer or modify them. One way they respond is by using impersonal *you* and other devices to shift from speaking for themselves as a specific person to speaking for a category of people, and to shift back to the personal.

The shift can construct a category of person not entitled to respond to the question as asked (1), or to place themselves in a category of people for whom the presuppositions of the question are inappropriate (2).

These shifts from specific to general can be seen as stance-taking in relation to the interviewer and his or her question. The use of impersonal *you* can be added to other devices (Stivers and Hayashi, 2010) that interviewees can use to reject a category or introduce a new category in relation to what they are offered in a question: as a patient, or a doctor, as a member of a generation or not or (elsewhere in our data) as a parent, mill worker, homeless person, or participant in a disaster. These recategorisations modify the kind of stance-taking projected by the question. They are among the resources for responding in an appropriate and acceptable way to questions from a stranger about one's personal life and opinions.

6.2 Shared perceptions and arguments

We have seen that situational insertion by the use of impersonal *you* can invoke membership in a category and the kinds of actions and entitlements appropriate to it. It can also be used to present personal perceptions and experience as shared, or potentially shared, by a whole group of people (Stirling and Manderson, 2011: 1590-1596). The invocation of a shared perception, even where it is offered as part of one's own experience, can support an argument by objectifying the situation or making it more vivid with circumstantial details (on warranting devices in interviews, see Smith, 1978;

Wooffitt, 1992; Potter, 1996). Of course, people invoke shared perceptions in all sorts of conversations, but this rhetorical support plays a specific role in interviews, where the interviewee would otherwise have limited epistemic authority to speak on a matter.

Context: In one of the projects we studied, interviewees in an area affected by Foot and Mouth Disease were asked for their own theories of the spread of the virus. The interviewee, a secretary in a primary school, has been describing the pyres of burning carcasses after the cull that was done to try to prevent the spread of the disease. Thanks to the Principal Investigator, Maggie Mort, we were able to listen to sound files for this project, so we have retranscribed them with the following symbols: (deleted name); [] overlap; (1) seconds silence; , short pause; . falling intonation; ? rising intonation.

Example 3: 5407 Int. 018

1. Interviewer: I mean thinking of that (name) I was gonna say that there are a lot of lay theories about how it spreads do you have a particular (2) explanation?
2. Interviewee: (1) I I think the a, the burning of the carcasses (1)
3. Interviewer: [right]
4. Interviewee: a. [I think] it was wind borne.
b. **You, you** could tell by the, the way the wind was blowing

c. and when **you** had these pyres,

d. it's, it just seemed to be, carried by that

5. Interviewer: Were you aware of those pyres where you live?

The interviewer links her question to a previous turn (“thinking of that”) (1). Even in asking the question, she weakens the status of the interviewee’s possible response by categorising it as one of “a lot of lay theories” (1), already relativised and categorised as non-authoritative in comparison with expert theories. The interviewee is not, of course, an epidemiologist, but she has been addressed throughout the interview as someone who has special knowledge of the outbreak based on living through it; here she is for the first time “lay”.

In her response, the interviewee stresses her epistemic authority, and the shift to impersonal *you* is part of this rhetoric. She starts with delays in 2, and when she pauses, the interviewer gives a continuer. In 4, she states her view in first person (a), with a very quiet “I think”, a marker of explicit stance-taking (Kärkkäinen, 2006). Then she uses impersonal *you* to report evidence that supports this stance (b); the direction of the wind that anyone or everyone could observe supports her “lay theory”. Similarly the phrase “when you had these pyres” presents them not just her own experience but that of everyone who was there to see and smell. Her actual claim about transmission is put in a construction that elides the perceiver, “it just seemed to be, carried by that”. So she does not need to say to whom it seemed this way, and she does not assert that the

disease *was* carried by that, just that such a perception would be natural to anyone who experienced the smell. The use of the impersonal pronoun both supports her argument, by offering this sense experience of the smell as objective, and makes it harder to refute, by presenting it as in fact a vivid and shared perception, whatever other expert or lay theories might be offered.

Such impersonalised evidence-giving is not restricted to debates about scientific issues such as the spread of a virus, where members of the public might be expected to be at a disadvantage; it is a resource that can be used in support of any stance-taking where participants orient to possible differences of opinion.

Context: The research project is about health services offered to mental health patients in the community. The interviewee has been responding to questions about what he would like to see changed in his neighbourhood, a typical survey question anyone in the neighbourhood might be asked and for which anyone is entitled to give a response. In the turn before the excerpt, he has been speaking for a group he defines as different from his own, saying that there is not enough in his neighbourhood for young people, from eight to twelve years old, to do. In the following excerpt, he develops the same point in terms of slightly older kids.

Example 4: 4410 – int12300

1. Q: So you would like to see more for them?

2. A:
- a. Oh yes most definitely.
 - b. And the early-mid teens just before they are leaving school, again absolutely nothing for them.
 - c. They are just roving round in gangs,
 - d. they are meeting up with the wrong people,
 - e. getting into bad habits,
 - f. they've gone in for these bad people, drugs etc.
 - g. **You** see it every single night on here
 - h. and when **you** go up to the shops for a paper you know mid afternoon, just gangs.
 - i. They were supposed to fetch in these snatch squads in weren't they for truants.
 - j. You know the police were given the powers to just stop any children who were supposed to be at school
 - k. to stop from you know roaming the streets.
 - l. But I can't see it happening,
 - m. I never see a policeman up here.

3. Q: So what sort of impact do you think it would have on the area by doing that?

The question (1) formulates a stance the interviewee could take, given what he has said. The interviewee agrees emphatically (a), and then goes on to give reasons for this opinion. The question projects a first person response, but the interviewee does not give it until the end of his turn. He makes five assertions about members of this age group,

all in general, third person form, as facts (b-f). Then he supports these assertions with a complex impersonal *you* construction. First he says, “you see it every single night here” (g); there is an implication that anyone would see it, not just him (just as anyone would smell it in Example 3). He adds to this picture what *you* see in the afternoon too (h), giving the specific circumstances in which he goes out then, so it is clear that whoever sees these practices is just going about their business, not being particularly snoopy. Then he shifts to another pronoun, *they* and *weren't they* (i), used in a vague sense here as someone in authority, which he then specifies as “the police” (j). At the end of his turn, he repeats what he himself doesn't or is unlikely to see, this time in first person (l) and reformulates this statement (m).

The interviewee has a rhetorical problem, in that he does not want to say in this particular response what should be done for people like him, in which case he would have a clear entitlement to speak as a member of the category affected; he wants to say what should be done for members of another category (younger people) and what is not done by members of a third category (the police). He presents his own legitimate role here as that of an observer, at night and in the afternoon. He supports this role by presenting it in detail as what anyone would see, as part of anyone's daily routine. The shift back to first person marks the end of his turn, by returning to the terms of the interviewer's question, asking what he personally would like to see done. The interviewer follows up in 3 with “so”, showing that he takes this very complex package

as an answer to his question, a statement of a possible change, a stance for which the interviewee can now be held accountable to elaborate and justify.

Kitigawa and Lehrer say that in impersonal and vague uses of *you*, “the interlocutor assumes the status of representative in some sense of the intended referent” (1990: 744). In Examples 3 and 4, the interviewees represent the perceptions of a group of people, those who live in the village where Foot and Mouth Disease was prevalent, or more observant members of the housing estate. We are arguing that the shift to a more general perspective has a rhetorical function in responding with stance-taking for which the interviewee might be seen as lacking epistemic authority, either because they are not expert or they are not members of the affected group. The *you* does not in these cases include the interviewer, who will not have had these perceptions and may not share them now (see Ushie (1994) on exclusive vs. non-exclusive uses). But the perceptions are rhetorically stronger for being distanced from the speaker and being shared.

6.3 Maxims, commonplaces and accounts

We have seen that one of the contexts in which impersonal *you* is used has been identified in the literature as “maxims” (Kitigawa and Lehrer, 1990) or the proverbial (Sacks, 1992). We discuss this kind of usage in terms of rhetorical commonplaces. We will argue that these commonplaces are typically used where the interviewee is presented with a rhetorical problem, for instance, responding to a potentially negative

characterisation of one's own actions or those of others without either granting such a characterisation has been made, or accepting it.

Context: In Example 5, the project is again oral history interviews on family relations through the generations. The extract is from late in the interview, where the interviewee (52 at the time of the interview) is prompted to talk about social class.

Example 5: 4938-Int.084

1. **Interviewer:** In this area when you were a kid, were there people who thought they were better than the rest?
2. **Subject:** Oh aye, well you always get people like that don't you.
3. **Interviewer:** What jobs would they have? What would make them feel different from the rest?
4. **Subject:** Anybody such as working in a bank and that, clerical.
5. **Interviewer:** They felt slightly up, did they?
6. **Subject:** Uh huh.

The question in 1 poses a dilemma by inviting the interviewee to make a pejorative comment on another group ("people who thought they were better than the rest"), and also by implying that these criticised people are associated with "this area when you were a kid", with pejorative implications for her own group. In 2, the interviewee uses a typical pattern of agreement followed by disagreement or qualification (Pomerantz,

1984), formulating the projected statement about “this area” in commonplace form with an impersonal *you*, “you always get people like that”. A tag question, “don’t you”, offers it as shared knowledge with the interviewer. So any implied acceptance of this particular criticism of others or of the particular neighbourhood and people in it are subsumed in a general maxim that this category of people is always present.

The impersonal *you* in 2 is part of a commonplace that would typically close off the topic. Here it does not, because the interviewer pursues it, insisting on an answer that applies not just to impersonal *you*, anyone in general, but to *you*, the interviewee in her community. In 3 the interviewer does reformulate the question in a way that softens the possible dilemma for the interviewee, by offering a device for categorising such people, by their jobs, and a possible motivation for members of the proposed category feeling themselves to be better. If the questioning in this example seems aggressive, it may be because the interviewee makes such efforts to avoid characterising their neighbours negatively, and the interviewer has to do so much of the conversational work of constructing this group himself before going on.

Commonplaces may also arise when interviewees are asked to say something that might be taken as leading to negative implications about themselves.

Context: The project is a study of young men’s attitudes to health. In the previous section, the interviewee has talked about his interest in sports, and has said “I like having competitions”, and the interviewer’s question is presented as following from this

statement. In these transcriptions, ellipses (. . .) are used to indicate pauses within the turn, not omissions.

Example 6: 5371 Int.025

1. I: Yeah. How important is being competitive and trying to beat each other ...
for guys to do?
2. R: a. Yeah ... if you're not competitive, what are you?
b. You're just ... you're just really nothing.
c. You've got to be competitive in something ...
d. because everywhere in life you've got to try and do, be competitive
compared to everybody else.
e. Like, you have to be better than a certain shop at doing something, or
cheaper ...
f. It's all competitive, life is.
3. I: And . . . OK, to change tack [continues]

The interviewer's question in 1 can have moral implications for the interviewee. The interviewer's "being competitive", is a personal attribute while the interviewee's "having competitions" is an activity. The interviewee has not actually talked about "trying to beat each other"; that is an implication or upshot (Heritage and Watson, 1979) drawn out by the interviewer in prompting the next response, but he does not challenge this

formulation. The interviewer softens these implications at the end of the question; he shifts from asking how important it is for him to how important it is “for guys”, for the category of males rather than the specific interviewee.

In 2, the interviewee takes the question as a call to account for *why* competition is important, not *how* important it is, and answers with a series of commonplaces that support and develop each other. His expectation of acceptance of these views is suggested by the rhetorical question in (a) (but some doubt about this general acceptance of competition may be indicated by his answering his own rhetorical question in b). He then rephrases the maxim in deontic form “you’ve got to” (c), but more specific and softened, not about the necessity of being competitive in general but about being competitive “in something”. In d, he rephrases it again in more general form, applying to “everywhere in life” and “compared to everybody else”. Pomerantz (1986) has noted that an Extreme Case Formulation is often used where the speaker is aware of possible challenges to what they are saying, and Sidnell (2004) notes how such formulations can protect the speaker against the interlocutor pursuing an account. Both those interpretations apply to the Extreme Case Formulations “everywhere” and “everybody else” in (d).

Then the interviewee offers more specific analogy referring to business enterprises, again with an impersonal *you* (e). In his final version, signalling the conclusion of his turn, he sums up the commonplace in its most general and most

impersonal form, “It’s all competitive, life is” (f). The extraposition of “life” gives more discourse weight to this very general subject, so it is not him, or guys, that are competitive, but all life. In Example 6, in contrast with Example 5, the rhetorical commonplaces, and the shift from personal to impersonal, “work”, in that the interviewer does not pursue a personal account and explicitly changes the topic.

We have treated commonplaces such as “you’ve got to be competitive in something” as a separate class of stance-taking using impersonal *you*. They are related to the other two classes we discussed, categorising and claiming shared experiences, in that they involve a shift from specific to general. But they are different in their relation to the addressee. The uses of impersonal *you* to recategorise or present shared experience (along with impersonal constructions and related devices) often place the interviewee in a category different from that of the interviewer, and the interviewee takes a stance as a resident of that place, a member of that generation, or as someone who has had this experience. The use of commonplaces (along with tag questions, rhetorical questions, and other related devices) enrolls the interviewer in sharing “general truths about the world” (Stirling and Manderson 211: 1586). In the examples we have analysed, they do this as part of a sequence of transforming the projected answer to the question, and subtly but sometimes successfully challenging the implication of a stance, or the call for an account for a stance.

7. Discussion

The analysis of these excerpts has drawn on and complemented insights from earlier studies of impersonal *you*, but has put them in the context of stance-taking, specifically in the genre of the research interview. We began with three research questions:

1. What resources does the use of impersonal *you*, and the move from specific to more general, provide for interviewees?
2. How are these resources used in the genre context of the social research interview?
3. How are interviewees' uses of these resources related to interviewers' questions and follow-ups?

Question 1: What resources does the use of impersonal *you* provide? Our analyses follow other studies in seeing the use of impersonal *you* as a resource in relation to other pronoun choices, *I*, *we*, *they*, or *one*, and in relation to other grammatical devices distinguishing specific and generic reference, such as the shift from past tense to present, and to discourse markers that cue shared knowledge. As these studies have shown, the use of impersonal *you* is not a single act, but part of a texture of interaction, for instance moving between specific and general narrative accounts, or between specific and shared experience, or a specific or general statement of knowledge. Stirling and Manderson (2011) have analysed impersonal *you* as a form

of membership categorisation, and in our first section we draw on that analysis. But they focus on narrative contexts, as do Kitigawa and Lehrer (1990), Ushie (1994), and others. Because of our range of interviews, including oral history but also interviews based on attitudes and issues, we gave more prominence to supporting arguments for a claim, and to accounting for behaviour and decisions. We have also given more emphasis to the use of commonplaces, as they are used in responding to rhetorical dilemmas that interviewees face.

Question 2: How are these resources used in the genre context of interviews?

Much of the work of interviews is eliciting stances from the interviewee. Our main innovation in this study was to investigate these dilemmas by seeing the pragmatic functions of impersonal *you* through the framework of stance-taking. Berman et al. (2002) have argued that the shift from specific to generic is itself a dimension of stance-taking, like the dimensions of evidence or affect. Stance-taking involves assertion of subjectivity, so it is consistent with the emphasis on speaker identity in many studies. In interviews, we found that a crucial aspect of speaker identity is entitlement to answer the specific question one has been asked. One category of people or another, for instance, people of one generation, or people who have had a certain kind of experience, may be more justified in answering the question, and the interviewee may move themselves into or out of these entitled categories. As interviews assign a specific range of roles to interviewees, they assign roles to the interviewers; in our examples,

the interlocutor is always a stranger with an institutional role as a questioner. Stance-taking also involves evaluation or orientation to an object. The interviewee may respond to the question as calling for stance-taking even when it is apparently a question of fact or personal history, such as one's observation of medical practice, or the issue of whether the interviewee confided in her father.

We can summarise our mapping of resources onto stance-taking as follows:

resource	stance-taking	examples
1. recategorising the interviewee	displaying entitlement or lack of entitlement to respond	1-2
2. displaying perceptions or experiences as shared	supporting argument, forestalling criticisms of claims	3-4
3. framing the response as a maxim or commonplace	responding to dilemmas, avoiding accounts for personal behaviour	5-6

Question 3: How are interviewees' uses of impersonal *you* related to interviewers' turns in the genre of the research interview? As we have noted, many previous studies have turned to interviews as sources for data, but they have usually presented their analyses as applying to the general use of pronouns in conversation, not to the specific interactional dilemmas posed by interviews. Studies have focused on personal narratives, because these are a context in which impersonal *you* is likely to occur. In our wider range of interviews, we have seen more questions about attitudes to

issues, other members of the community, or social processes. The continuum of specific vs. general is constitutive for interviews, in which specific people are chosen to talk about more general social issues such as medical treatment, housing, kinship, or lifestyles. Interviewer questions may try to constrain the response to one point on this continuum, for instance by saying “personally”, or by formulating a response as a general rule. But interviewees may shift along this continuum to manage questions.

Research interviews as an institutional genre apparently give a great deal of control to the interviewer. But interviewees are not completely constrained by these conventions. Shifts from personal to impersonal constructions can be seen as one way of locally deflecting the agenda projected by the interviewer. For instance the shift can be used to reformulate the position of the interviewee (as in example 1), to strengthen the epistemic status of a response that had been framed as epistemically weak (example 3), or to reframe elicited moral evaluations (example 5).

8. Conclusion

We have argued that the uses of impersonal *you* that we have analysed should be seen in the context of the research interview as an institutionalised form of stance-taking in interaction. Research interviews are typically transcribed, and are used by researchers mainly in that transcribed form. That means they are not performed for their immediate effects on the participants, like doctor-patient or therapeutic interviews, though they may have emotional or informational effects. Unlike broadcast interviews, they are not

performed to be overheard by people other than the participants. As many critical treatments of interviews have shown, publications based on interviews typically abstract away from the interaction in interviews, and report words that interviewees have said without the interaction with the interviewer or sometimes even the full turn of the interviewee. Discourse analysts and others have tried to refocus researchers' attention on the interactional processes by which their data are produced.

Attention to categorisation, argument, and invocation of commonplaces can be one part of this refocusing of social science research methods. In this paper, we have highlighted the use of impersonal *you* as a particularly salient marker of these rhetorical processes. One practical advantage of an approach on this level is that it can use the transcripts as researchers produce them, if they are indeed "strict transcriptions" (Hammersley, 2010), with the words recorded fully and consistently.

The shifts we have analysed are as relevant to the social scientists as they are to discourse analysts. Interviewees' categorisations are likely to be more subtle, fluid, and contingent than the social categories (mother, patient, resident, young person) taken for granted for the purposes of research. Interviewees' attempts to support their stance are as telling as what stance they are taking; for instance, the appeal to shared perceptions, rather than just one's own experience or observation, shows the interviewee takes this issue to be potentially arguable, and their perception potentially in need of support. So the interviewer learns not just the interviewee's stance, but the sort of issue they take it

to be. Commonplaces do not just indicate a shared and taken-for-granted belief, their use indicates that the interviewee offers a statement as shared, as a good enough response to a problem. Attention to interactional stance-taking can open up the process by which social science knowledge is developed from qualitative interviews. We would argue that impersonal *you* is a feature particularly relevant to the stance-taking in the interview genre.

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Appendix 1: Data Sources

Project numbers, titles and principal investigators of projects from which examples were drawn:

4410 - Urban Regeneration, Mental Health and Quality of Life in Wythenshawe, South Manchester, 1998-2001, P. J Huxley, King's College London. Institute of Psychiatry. Health Services Research Department, R. Thomas, University of Manchester.

Department of Geography, A. Rogers, National Primary Care Research and Development Centre, B. Robson, University of Manchester. Department of Geography (interviews conducted 1998-2001).

4938 - Families, Social Mobility and Ageing, an Intergenerational Approach, 1900-1988 (100 Families), P. Thompson, University of Essex. Department of Sociology, H. Newby, University of Essex. Department of Sociology (interviews conducted 1985-1988).

4943 - Mothers and Daughters: Accounts of Health in the Grandmother Generation, 1945-1978. Mildred Blaxter, University of East Anglia (interviews conducted 1977-78).

5371 - Young Men, Masculinities and Health, 2003-2004, R. De Visser, University of Sussex. Department of Psychology and J. A. Smith, J.A., Birkbeck, University of London. School of Psychology (interviews conducted 2003-2004).

5407 - Health and Social Consequences of the Foot and Mouth Disease Epidemic in North Cumbria, 2001-2003. Maggie Mort, Lancaster University, Institute of Health Research (interviews conducted 2001-3).

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