



A Social and Pragmatic Analysis of the Second Person Deixis *You*

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Abstract

Based on the researches on the person deixis by numerous scholars, this paper focuses on a social and pragmatic analysis of the second person deixis English. The results are applicable to adequate translation of *you*.

Keywords: Second person deixis, Social meaning, Pragmatic meaning

Person deixis is an important component of pragmatics. With reference to the addresser, the addressee and the third party involved in a conversation, person deixis indicate the social status, interpersonal relationship and other factors of the conversational parties.

Since Brown and Gilman (1960) initiated the study of person deixis. Numerous scholars have researched the issue from the perspectives of semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics and contrastive linguistics. Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1979) examined how social factors are related to aspects of verbal interaction. The Chinese scholars have also studied deeply in the field of person deixis. He Ziran (1988, 1997) and He Zhaoxiong (1989, 2000) are chiefly devoted to the definition, classification and basic use of the deictic items. Chen Zhi'an and Peng Xuanwei (1994) apply the systemic and functional theories to the study of person deixis mainly on the lexical and grammatical level. Until the 1970s or 1980s, under the influence of discourse analysis, sociolinguists began to pay more attention to the social information about the addresser and addressee in the speech context. Huang Guowen (1999) makes a discourse analysis of the personal pronoun, while Tian Hailong (2001) conducts a sociolinguistic study of the choice between "we" and "wo-men" in modern Chinese monologues and finds that different addressers use the two personal pronouns at a different rate in expressing their ideas, which finding reflects a addresser's personality such as self-confidence and modesty. Du Xiaohong's paper (2003) probes the pragmatic effect and the artistic value of the unconventional choices of person deixis through an analysis of the unconventional use of person deixis in the *Scarlet Letter*.

Based on their researches, this paper focuses on a social and pragmatic analysis of the second person deixis English. The results of this analysis are applicable to adequate translation of *you*.

As to the second person deixis, many European languages have two forms of second person deixis. The so-called T-form is used to address intimate friends and relatives; while V-form is the plural form which is used for people one does not know or whom one treats with respect and deference (Duck, 1998). In Old English, there were a V form and a T form for the addressee, which contrast revealed much of the social information about the two parties in communication. Brown (1965) also notes that the choice of just one single word (thou or you) tells everyone about the addresser's status and familiarity relative to the other person and communicates something about the closeness or social distance of relationship between addresser and addressee. *You* is thus used to address a person superior to oneself in status. *Thou* is reserved for those of status lower than oneself. Besides, *thou* was also used as an insult indicating moral distance or inferiority when two persons were otherwise socially equal. On contrary, the V-form *you* can be used to satirize the addressee of a lower status.

For example:

[1] Tamburlaine: Here, Turk; wilt thou have a clean trencher?

Bajazeth: Ay, tyrant, and more meat.

Tamburlaine: Soft, sir! *You* must be dieted; too much eating will make you surfeit.

The dialogue is quoted from *Tamburlaine the Great* Part I act IV. Here the Turkish king Bajazeth is only a captive under the arrest of Tamburlaine, but Tamburlaine still uses the V-form *you* to refer to Bajazeth. It is obvious that Tamburlaine intends to humiliate Bajazeth other than show respect for him (Chen Zhi'an & Peng Xuanwei, 1994).

However, that contrast has now disappeared from modern English, leaving the social information about the two sides of communication understood in context. *You* is only the item for an addressee or addressees regardless of age, social status, gender, etc.. The use of *you* for an entity other than the addressee gives rise to various pragmatic meanings on different occasions, as will be seen in the following sections.

1. The disappearance of “thou” vs. “you” contrast and the various compensatory methods

In Old English, speakers first used “thou” and “ye” and later replaced “ye” with “you”. Brown and Gilman (1986:161) propose the use of T and V as signs for a familiar and a polite pronoun in any language. The T form in Old English--*thou* has disappeared from Modern English. The reason for the disappearance of the word is not quite clear. Yet, a popular version is that the disappearance of *thou* results from the tendency to pursue an egalitarian spirit since the seventeenth century, which has accordingly brought about the loss in the pronominal system. (Yang Yonglin, 2004: 87)

With the disappearance of the *thou* vs. *ye* contrast, the use of *you* alone is not capable of revealing social information. In different situations different social significance should be interpreted together with other context clues. When significant disparity in terms of age, social status, interpersonal relationship etc. does not exist between both parties in conversation, *you* equals the T-form. If great disparity exists, *you* used for the more powerful side equals the V-form. How to tell whether *you* is the T-form or the V-form depends on context. In referring to an inferior, or a familiar person, *you* in use is the T-form. In talking to a superior, or an unfamiliar person or on formal occasions, *you* in the utterance is the V-form. Normally there are many context clues, which can lead readers or hearers to a correct judgment of the relationship between the two sides in communication. From the sociolinguistic point of view, different linguistic means can be applied to perform the same communicative function, and in reverse, the same linguistic means can perform different communicative functions. In spite of the disappearance of *thou* from English pronominal system, social functions of the V form can still be performed by the following methods.

1.1 Use of “title+ family name”

By using “title + family name” together with “you” to refer to the addressee, the speaker shows reverence or certain distance to the addressee. Look at the following examples:

[2] a. Barbara: Oh there *you* are, *Mr. Shirley!* [between them] This is my father: I told *you* he was a Secularist, didn't I? Perhaps *you*'ll be able to comfort one another. (*Major Barbara*, 1999:140)

b. Undershaft [Sardonically gallant]: *Mrs. Baines:* *you* are irresistible. I cant deny myself the satisfaction of making Bodger pay up. *You* shall have *your* five thousand pounds. (Ib, 1999:206)

In example [2] a., “you” is used together with “Mr. Shirley” by Barbara in introducing Shirley to her father. She is showing respect to Mr. Shirley in the face of her father. This form of addressing is often used by speakers in their first meeting. In example [1]b., Undershaft, a gentleman from the upper social class is showing respect to Mrs. Baines. This is a common practice by gentlemen in western societies, where the tradition of Lady first is prevalent.

1.2 Pronominal expression

The co-occurrence of *you* with pronominal expressions in the same utterance is often used to express a deferential meaning. As early as the 16th century the pronominal expression came into use in English to express the power semantic. Expressions like *Your Grace*, *Your Majesty*, *Your Honor* and *Your Eminence* fall into this category. Bloomfield (1933:256) said “The meaning of second-person substitutes is limited in some language by the circumstance that they are not used in deferential speech; instead, the hearer is designated by some honorific term (your Honor, your Excellency, your Majesty).” However, these honorific terms are restricted by the regular practice specific to English culture. The choice of honorific terms is determined by the contexts in which these terms are used and the identities of the referents to which the terms apply. *Your honor* is an honorific term to refer to the judge in courtroom, *Your Grace* to a bishop in ritual, and other terms like *Your Highness* to a prince or princess. (Yang Yonglin, 2004: 90)

1.3 Lexical items or syntactic patterns

Besides the above two cases in which *you* implies a deferential reading, the same interpretation can be achieved by using periphrastic expressions, modal verbs, and/or certain syntactic structures. Look at the following examples.

[3] a. Morrison: *May I* speak a word to *you*, *my lady?* (*Major Barbara*, 1999:54)

b. Undershaft: For me there is only one true morality; but it might not fit you, as you do not manufacture aerial battleships. There is only one true morality for every man; but every man has not the same true morality.

Lomax [overtaxed]: Would *you* mind saying that again? I didn't quite follow it. (Ib, 1999:74)

c. Cusins: *Let me advise you* to study Greek, Mr. Undershaft. Greek scholars are privileged men. Few of them know anything else; but their position is unchallengeable.... (Ib, 1999: 64)

In the above three examples, *you* alone actually does not show any deference. In [3]a, Morrison, the servant, lower in social status, uses a differential title *my lady* in addition to a modal verb *may* to show his reverence to his master Lady Britomart, who is assumed to be more powerful than him in terms of social status. In [3]b, Lomax uses a polite "*Would you mind ...?*" in asking his future father-in-law to repeat something. Undershaft is superior to Lomax in terms of age and social status. Thus power semantic predominates. Cusins in [3]c uses "let me advise you" together with "Mr. Undershaft" in addressing his future father-in-law. "Let me advise you" is a polite and indirect way of giving advice. On the one hand, he is showing due respect to Undershaft; on the other, he is showing that he is a well-educated and well-cultivated young man.

As a compensation for the loss of the V vs. T contrast in English, the above mentioned devices are often used in the following different situations for deference. Speakers from high social class tend to speak politely toward each other to show mutual respect as well as to indicate they are from high social classes. If an addressee is superior to a speaker in terms of age, wealth, descent, education, occupation and so on, he is normally addressed by *you* together with a deferential expression. On formal occasions, people also tend to use the deferential terms to address each other. In spite of the different social status, strangers on their first meeting often use a combination of *you* and a deferential term to refer to each other in order to be polite.

2. *You* for generic reference

There is a non-deictic use of *you* in which it does not refer to any particular person(s):

[4] a. You novel! know what you can do till you try.

b. You will be fined if you spit or litter.

Here *you* is used to talk about people generally, and is equivalent to the slightly formal *one*, a less prototypical member of the personal pronoun category (Pulim & Huddleston, 2005:103). According to the abovementioned two examples, it can be assumed that *you*, as a generic deictic item, is usually used to illustrate a common truth or a rule.

3. *You* as a T form

Let's now look at the context in which *you* is a T form. Generally speaking, *you* appearing in one of the following situations is a T form. An addressee may be inferior to a speaker in terms of age, wealth, descent, education, occupation and so on, and he will be addressed by a T form *you* in such a case. If the two speakers are on familiar terms, like husband and wife, family members, friends or those with shared fate, they tend to address each other with a T form *you*. The use of *you* as in a T form is far more complicated than what was discussed above. There is not enough space to do it justly. What was mentioned above are only some of the common uses.

Vocatives are noun phrases that refer to the addressee, but are not syntactically or semantically incorporated as the arguments of a predicate; they are rather set apart prosodically from the body of a sentence that may accompany them (Levinson, 2001: 71). Less commonly, *you* is used as a vocative, usually as a deliberate insult and it is a T form *you*, as in the case of "Bill: *You* lie, *you* old soup Kitchener, *you*. There was a young man here. Did I offer to hit him or did I not?" (*Major Barbara*, 1999:116) and "Bill: I'm no gin drinker, *you* old liar;...An here I am, talkin to a rotten old blighter like *you* sted o givin her wot for..." (*Major Barbara*, 1999:120) Bill in the two examples is from lower social class, is not well-educated and is full of resentment and dissatisfaction toward society, which information is revealed in his use of *you* as a vocative.

The vocative *you* is used to attract the addressee's attention, the implication of which is that: it is *you* that I am talking to. For example,

[5] Hey *you*, *you* just scratched my car with your Frisbee.

4. *You* in place of *I*

Besides referring to the addressee, *you* can also be used to refer to the speaker himself/herself in literary discourse as the interior monologue or free direct thought of modern fiction and as the soliloquy in drama (Wales, 1996: 72). The speaker's intention as realized by such replacement is to make the utterance less personal because the first person deictic items are always related to something personal or egocentric. Or possibly the speaker intends to remind the addressee to think in the speaker's position and understand or share the speaker's feelings. Look at the following example.

[6] Trapp: Yes, well, *you* can't... marry someone...when *you*'re in love with someone else. Can *you*? ... (*The Sound of Music*)

In confessing one's love to somebody to avoid the embarrassment of being refused, the speaker uses *you* instead of *I* to refer to himself to express his love indirectly. This may be partly due to the speaker's personality, who is somewhat shy and afraid of being hurt if rejected. The shift from the first person pronoun to the second person pronoun in referring to oneself enlarges the distance between the speaker and his choice of self-referring, thus making what he says about himself sound like talking about other people.

This study will help English learners improve the translation skills on the lexical level. We conclude that in translating *you* we should keep in mind that a correct understanding and proper translation of *you* cannot be achieved if context clues for the social and pragmatic meanings of *you* in a source language are not taken into consideration.

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