

Clusivity of Dutch *wij*

Evidence from pointing*

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1. Introduction

The plurality of personal pronouns differs from the plurality of nominals. While plurality in nominals has the meaning of ‘more than one of the same category’, plurality of pronouns is much more complex. The first-person plural pronoun, for example, can refer to either the speaker and his addressee(s), the speaker, the addressee(s) and other(s), or to the speaker and other(s). In order to distinguish between these different meanings, some languages have two distinct non-singular forms, called ‘inclusive’ and ‘exclusive’. Dutch is not such a language. However, this does not mean that Dutch speakers are unaware of the different meanings of the first-person plural. Support for this claim comes from the use of pointing gestures which coincide with the first-person plural pronoun, obtained from a corpus of conversational interviews.¹

2. Clusivity

All languages in the world have ways to express ‘I’ to refer to the speaker, ‘you’ to refer to the addressee, and ‘he’, ‘she’ and ‘it’ to refer to a third person. Languages vary with respect to the presence of additional distinctions, such as number. As a result, languages differ, sometimes considerably, in the number of pronouns that they have. Compare for example the paradigms of Tinrin (a Melanesian language) in (1) with that of Dutch in (2).

(1) **Tinrin** (cf. Osumi 1995)

Singular	Dual		Plural	
	Excl	Incl	Excl	Incl
1 nro	haru	komu	hari	kevi
2 nrü	kou		wiri	
3 nrî	nrorru		nrorri	

(2) Dutch

	Singular	Plural
1	ik	wij
2	jij/u	jullie/u
3	hij	zij
3	zij	zij
3	het	zij

As compared to Dutch, Tinrin has an additional dual, with a further distinction in terms of inclusive and exclusive forms for the first-person dual and plural. The inclusive form signals that the addressee is included in the reference of the speaker; the exclusive pronoun signals that the addressee is excluded from the reference. In Dutch, on the other hand, these meanings are all covered by a single first-person plural form, i.e. *wij*.

The term ‘plurality’ should be handled with care. For nominals its meaning is that of ‘more than one instance of the same category’. *Tables*, for example, refers to more than one *table*. However, we have seen that for pronouns, and in particular for first-person pronouns such as *we*, the notion of plurality is more complex. Rather than distinguish between the *number* of individuals, the first-person plural pronoun distinguishes between the *type* of individuals included in the pronoun’s reference. For this reason, Cysouw (2003) proposes to use the term ‘group’ instead, to emphasize that plurality in pronouns involves persons rather than number. Bhat (2004) uses the term ‘conjunction’, in line with the observation that individuals referred to by a first-person plural pronoun involve a composition (i.e. 1+2, 1+3, 1+2+3). Finally, Daniel (2005) maintains that the inclusive, which includes the second person, should be regarded as a separate fourth person, given that most inclusives use independent stems, which are morphologically unrelated to first-person exclusive.

Because the first-person plural pronoun refers to several individuals, its referents sometimes need to be differentiated from one another. In Tinrin this is not a problem. If a speaker wishes to include the addressee in the reference of a plural pronoun he can use the form *komu*, signalling first and second person. The same holds for a situation in which a speaker wishes to refer to himself and to several other persons, excluding the addressee (in which case the form *hari* would be appropriate). Dutch does not allow this choice. The Dutch first-person plural pronoun *wij* signals the speaker plus any number of other, non-specified participants. Hence, *wij* illustrates Bhat’s observation that the specific reference of first-person plurals is often quite vague.

Dutch speakers can normally interpret the intended reference of *wij* on the basis of context and world knowledge. However, when a speaker wishes to make the reference of *wij* explicit, he can do this only by naming the intended referents separately. Compare (3) and (4).

- (3) Wij hebben de afwas gedaan
'We did the dishes'
- (4) John en ik hebben de afwas gedaan
'John and I did the dishes'

The inclusive/exclusive distinction in pronouns has received a lot of attention; see in particular the papers in Filimonova (2005), which gave rise to “the birth of a new term denoting the phenomenon of inclusive/exclusive distinction and comprising simultaneously both members of the opposition” (cf. Filimonova 2005: xii), viz. ‘clusivity’. However, the focus in the literature has so far been on the auditory modality of languages, and has not taken into account the visual modality of the languages discussed.² In what follows, I focus in some detail on the latter aspect. As I will show, speakers of Dutch sometimes make use of pointing gestures to make explicit the intended referents of the pronoun *wij*.

3. Pointing gestures

According to Kendon (1970), there is a non-arbitrary relation between speech and body movements. Fluent speech is marked by a highly precise coordination between lexical items and gestures, suggesting that the term ‘language’ should refer not only to speech but also to gestures. Gestures can reveal specific inherent features of word categories which cannot be deduced from the words themselves. For example, personal pronouns may be accompanied by pointing gestures. Such gestures have a clear and general function, namely reference. Speakers can make use of pointing to specify persons, objects and events in the discourse situation itself, and they can use these gestures when there is nothing objectively or physically present for the speaker to point at. In the latter case the speaker creates a (metaphorical) gestural space in which abstract ideas have a physical locus (cf. Kendon 2004, McNeill 1992). Consider the last point in relation to the inclusive/exclusive distinction in Dutch. The intended reference of the pronoun *wij* is not explicitly signalled by the pronoun itself — to this extent, the pronoun can be said to be ‘underspecified’. The use of an additional pointing gesture serves to make the speaker’s intended reference explicit.

Speakers use pointing gestures to signal a pronoun’s intended reference. However, addressees do not appear to interpret pointing gestures as mere indicators. Rather, the interpretation that they assign to a combination of a pointing gesture and a pronoun depends on the context of the discourse. As Zwets (2009) shows, such combinations among other things resolve ambiguities, create contrasts and establish topic-shifts.

4. Inclusive and exclusive *wij*

In order to find examples of pointing gestures which occur in combination with *wij* (or its unstressed variant *we*), a corpus of 200 minutes of video material of Dutch television programmes was annotated, using Elan. This yielded several relevant examples, of which I will discuss four below.

In the first example, *wij* is used to refer to both the addressee and the speaker herself. (Here and below, strokes represent the most salient part of the gesture, square brackets indicate stretches of speech during which the pointing gesture is maintained and hashes represent pauses in speech. Round brackets indicate that the sentence has no clear endpoint.)

- (5) nou de een die heb de mooi # [wat we zeiden] (...)
 well the one that has the beautiful # what we said
 ‘Well, someone has a beautiful... [What we said]’



Figure 1. *We* includes the addressee, with a third person present

The context of (5) is as follows. Three persons (A, B and C) are talking to each other. A (a guest) is telling C (the host of the show) why she never walks the red carpet. When A wants to mention something that she had been discussing with B (the other guest) earlier, A briefly turns to B and says *wat we zeiden*, at the same time pointing at B. This signals that B is the addressee of A's remark, and hence that A used an instance of inclusive *we*. If Dutch had an inclusive/exclusive contrast in its pronoun system, A could have used the exclusive form of *we* while continuing to look at C; it would then have been clear to C that he is not included in the pronoun's reference. However, since Dutch lacks an inclusive/exclusive contrast, A must point at B instead. This gesture signals that B is included in the reference of *we*, and not C. We may therefore conclude that the full reference of *we* is provided by the pointing gesture accompanying B's remark.³

In the second example, A (the host) is sitting at a table with his guest (B) and his side-kick, surrounded by the studio audience. A is talking to B, an art expert, about a small painting contained in a box on the table in front of them. A directs

B's attention to the box, saying that it contains a full-sized replica of the painting. He then turns to *B* and tells him that they will have a look at the painting shortly. The relevant utterance is given in (6).

- (6) het zit hier op ware grootte in als een replica daar [gaan we zo naar kijken]
 it sits here on true size in as a replica there go we so at look
 'In here we have a full-sized replica. [which we will have a look at shortly]'



Figure 2. *We* includes the addressee, with several third persons present

When *A* utters *gaan we zo naar kijken* he uses a pointing gesture that is directed to *B*. This includes *B* in *A*'s reference and excludes all other possible referents. Notice that the pointing gesture is not redundant. *A* could also have been pointing at his side-kick so as to indicate that both he and his side-kick were going to have a look at the painting (since *B*, who brought the painting along, already knows what it looks like). *A* could also have pointed backwards to signal that he was going to have a look at the painting together with the audience. Yet another possible reference of *we* would have been 'everybody' (i.e. *A* + *B* + the side-kick + the audience). In this case, *A* would probably not have used a pointing gesture at all, given the all-inclusive reference of the pronoun. This example, then, clearly shows that the exact referent of *we* is not specified just by the pronoun, but by the combination of the pronoun and the pointing gesture.

Speakers can also exclude the addressee with the help of a pointing gesture. An example of this is given in (7).

- (7) daarbij hebben [we ook nog] lang eh op het toilet gezeten
 furthermore have we too still long eh on the toilet seated
 'Furthermore, [we also] spent a long time on the toilet'

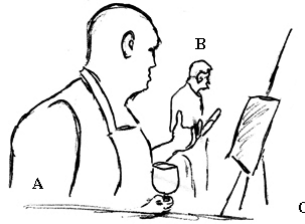


Figure 3. Exclusive *we* with a third person present

In this example, C (the host, not in the picture) is talking to A (one of his guests) about the painting A has just made. A explains that the painting represents the dish which C made and which A, B and C had for breakfast earlier. A adds that the dish was very “special”, followed by the utterance in (7). A’s *we ook nog* is accompanied by a pointing gesture to B, who is standing next to A, painting. While A’s use of *we* could have referred to A+B+C (given that they all ate the dish), the pointing gesture excludes C from the pronoun’s reference. Again, the pointing gesture makes the use of *we* fully explicit.

So far, I have discussed examples in which the pointing gesture coincides with *wij* in contexts which included a third person. However, a speaker can also exclude his addressee while including an absent third person in his reference. (8) is an example of such a case.

- (8) dus ja # dan kunnen ze toch beter bij ons zijn waar [wij] het
 so yes then can they actually better with us be where we it
 heel erg goed (...)
 very very good
 ‘So, then it’s better for them to be here with us, where [we] very good’

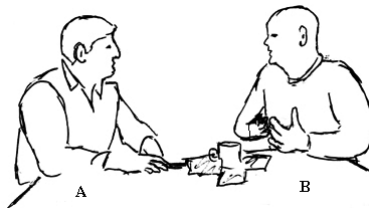


Figure 4. Excluding addressee with no third person present

A (the host) is talking to B (his guest) about B’s adopted children. B does not understand why some people think adoption is egotistical, uttering (8). As Figure 4 shows, B’s use of *wij* is accompanied by a pointing gesture to himself. This serves to exclude his addressee, i.e. A, from the reference of *wij*. The reason for this is that B is talking about a situation in which children from a foreign country are adopted by people in the Netherlands. One possible meaning of *wij* is therefore that

Dutch people in general (i.e. including *A*) can provide a better home for adopted children. However, *B* intends *wij* to refer to *B* and his partner. However, since *B*'s partner is not present, *B* cannot point at her (as in examples of the kind in (7)). *B*'s pointing gesture to himself serves to make the reference of *wij* explicit.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Research on the inclusive/exclusive distinction in pronoun systems has so far focused only on the auditory modality of languages. This suggests, incorrectly, that this distinction occurs in some languages but not in others. The study of gestures shows that the inclusive/exclusive distinction can also be expressed by speakers whose language does not have this distinction in its pronoun system.

The examples discussed in Section 4 show how underspecified pronouns can be specified with the help of a pointing gesture. Such a gesture is arguably more efficient than the possibility illustrated in (4), viz. to name each of the intended referents separately. The examples also raise several questions, however. For instance, how can we account for the fact that most of the instances of *wij/we* in the corpus are *not* accompanied by pointing gestures? A reasonable answer is that in these cases the exact reference of the pronoun is either supplied by the context, or is allowed to remain unspecific for pragmatic reasons. In each of the examples discussed in Section 4 the use of *wij/we* is ambiguous. However, this does not mean that a hearer would not have been able to interpret the utterances in the absence of a disambiguating pointing gesture. For instance, without a pointing gesture *wij* in (8) could have been interpreted as referring to the speaker and his partner or to the Dutch in general. Either way, the hearer would have chosen an interpretation that was, according to him, most suitable in the conversation. However, the speaker of (8) wants to specify explicitly that he is referring to himself — and this requires the use of an additional disambiguating pointing gesture.

Another reason for why *wij* is sometimes accompanied by a pointing gesture is that this helps the addressee to shift between topics, i.e. shift from a person who was the topic of the conversation to a new person. Consider again (5) and (6), where the speaker is talking to one person and then directs his attention to another. The addition of a pointing gesture arguably eases the transition between the addressees. The use of pointing gestures in these examples also sheds new light on the use of strong and weak pronoun forms in topic-shift. It is usually assumed that weak forms such as *we* are used to signal a continuing topic, while the use of strong forms such as *wij* signals a contrastive reading or a topic-shift (cf. e.g. De Hoop 2004). However, notice that in three of the four examples in Section 4 the speaker uses a pointing gesture while saying *we*. In at least two of these cases, viz.

(5) and (6), this gesture can be interpreted as involving a topic-shift. This suggests that pointing can also be used to mark topic-shifts, even in those cases where the pronoun is unstressed. A reasonable hypothesis is that in such cases the pointing gesture takes over the contrastive function of the pronoun.

Another question that must be addressed concerns the presence versus the absence of third persons in those cases where the use of *wij/we* excludes the addressee. A case in point is (8), where *wij* has the meaning 1+3; that is, one half of the reference is present in the local context (the first person) while the other half (the third person) is absent. The speaker in (8) solves this 'problem' by pointing at himself. Another possible situation would be one in which the speaker points at an absent third person while uttering *wij/we*. Here, too, one half of the reference is present (the first person) while the other half (the third person) is not. Cases like these suggest that the traditional deictic/anaphoric classification of pronouns is problematic. Pronouns can be anaphoric, i.e. refer to an earlier element in the text, or deictic, i.e. refer to an element which is prominent in the local context (see e.g. Bresnan 2001). However, in (8) the pronoun refers to both an entity that was mentioned earlier in the text and to a salient entity outside the text. It is therefore not immediately clear whether *wij* here is deictic or anaphoric. I propose that cases in which a speaker points to himself involve deictic reference while cases in which a speaker points at an absent third person involve anaphoric reference; in the latter, the topic of the pointing gesture is equivalent to that of the pronoun.

The examples discussed in this paper all involve cases which, in a language that makes this distinction, would be expressed with dual forms: each of the cases considered involved *wij* (1+2 or 1+3) as opposed to other persons (2 or 3). It is not unthinkable that a speaker can signal more than one person by means of a pointing gesture to each of the persons concerned (i.e. 1+3+3(+...) or 1+2+2(+...)). The fact that I have not found any examples of this in my corpus does not mean that Dutch lacks this possibility. It is worth noting that another language which uses pointing signs, i.e. Sign Language of the Netherlands (SLN), makes highly detailed distinctions between persons and groups of persons, including a contrast between dual, trial and plural (Baker et al. 2008). There is no reason to suggest that the gestural space for spoken modalities is any less restricted.

In conclusion, we have seen that the pointing gestures which sometimes accompany the use of the Dutch first-person pronoun *wij/we* are a consequence of the fact that the reference of this pronoun is underspecified by the pronoun itself. While the Dutch pronoun system does not distinguish between inclusive and exclusive forms, speakers can make this distinction with the help of additional pointing gestures. This suggests, then, that languages do not so much differ in the range of pronominal reference as in the modality in which this reference is expressed.

Notes

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1. The cooccurrence of gestures with personal pronouns is not as straightforward as is suggested here. McNeill (1992) notes that gestures cooccur with new or ‘relevant’ information. Personal pronouns, on the other hand, refer to persons mentioned earlier or to persons salient in the actual discourse situation (see Bhat 2004). This would suggest that gestures and personal pronouns should not coincide.
2. That is, the visual modality of spoken languages, i.e. *gestures*. For a discussion on the inclusive/exclusive distinction in (American) sign language, see Cormier (2005, 2007).
3. It should be noted that I am not claiming that the function of pointing gestures is limited to indicating ‘clusivity’.

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