REGISTER, GENRE AND REFERENTIAL AMBIGUITY OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS: A CROSS-LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper argues for revisiting the traditional adscription of ambiguous readings of personal pronouns, such as hearer-dominant *we* or generic *you*, pluralis maiestatis and pluralis modestiae to specific genres and/or registers. Indeed, in many languages these phenomena are considered typical for a certain genre, register or discourse context. In this paper, I will argue, on the basis of quantitative data and a qualitative analysis of examples taken from different genres (including purposefully creative language use in fiction), that a more accurate account may be formulated in terms of (inter)subjective effect, viz. the attention to the (inter)locutor (among others Benveniste 1966), as a more suitable explanation for the variation of these phenomena attested in corpora.

     The hearer-oriented uses of *we,* for instance, are considered typical for relationships characterized by power asymmetries such as teacher-student, doctor-patient (Haverkate 1984: 87; Brown & Levinson 1987), whereas generic and speaker-referring *you* have been considered a feature of (informal) oral language than written discourse (Hidalgo Navarro 1996). Recent corpus-based analyses including quantitative and qualitative analyses, however, call for a more nuanced view (De Cock 2011 on Spanish and English; Tarenskeen 2010 on Dutch). We may, for example, find hearer-oriented or even hearer-dominant 1st person plural forms (*Have we taken our medicine?*) in contexts where no power-relationship can be defined, e.g. among couples.

     It will be shown that these uses have different intersubjective effects, however. Their distribution is in line with overall differences as to intersubjectivity according to register and genre, beyond referential ambiguity. The concept of (inter)subjectivity then allows for a more comprehensive analysis of these phenomena and their occurrence in specific registers and genres, addressing the way in which the (inter)locutor is taken into account in each genre.

Keywords: Register; Subjectivity; Intersubjectivity; Genre; Personal pronoun.

1. Introduction[1]

Referentially ambiguous uses have often drawn attention as an 'oddity', a divergent use

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posing problems to grammatical theories (but interestingly, much less so to speakers and hearers in concrete interactions, see Kluge 2016, this volume). It is then perhaps not surprising that these referentially ambiguous uses have often been linked to a specific genre, register, social or geographical group, in an attempt to explain linguistic behavior that was perceived as divergent. Moreover, as pointed out by Helmbrecht (2015: 178), "the non-prototypical use is usually strongly restricted to certain contexts (grammatical contexts/pragmatic and discourse contexts)". In this paper, I will focus on three referentially ambiguous uses that have been frequently claimed – both in academia and in society at large – to show register- and genre-specificity,. These are generic uses of the 2nd person singular, hearer-dominant uses of the 1st person plural, and uses known as pluralis maiestatis or pluralis modestiae (author's plural), viz. a 1st person plural to refer to a singular speaker/writer. The suggestion of register- and genre-specificity of these referentially ambiguous uses is not restricted to one specific language but argued for in various Romance and Germanic languages. For the purposes of this article, register will be understood as "a variety associated with a particular situation of use (including particular communicative purposes). The description of a register covers three major components: The situational context, the linguistic features, and the functional relationships between the first two components" (Biber & Conrad 2009: 6). Genre will be considered as defined by a conversational contract (Fraser & Nolen 1981), that is, as a communication form consisting of a set of (often implicit) rules.

In view of the widespread claims concerning register- and genre-specificity of referentially ambiguous uses, this article will then not be language-specific but involves various Romance and Germanic languages. On the one hand, I will offer corpus evidence both from my own previous work and from other corpus-based studies to confirm or disconfirm these claims. On the other hand, I will show that a more accurate analysis of the link between genres, registers or specific discourse contexts, and referentially ambiguous uses may be established through the concept of intersubjectivity, which I will further clarify in the following section.

2. Subjectivity/intersubjectivity

My approach of subjectivity and intersubjectivity (see also De Cock 2015 for a more detailed discussion) is based on the following definitions. "The term subjectivity refers to the way in which natural languages, in their structure and their normal manner of operation, provide for the locutionary agent's *expression of himself and his own attitudes and beliefs*' associated with social stance and identity)" (Lyons 1982: 102, elaborating on Benveniste's 1966 description of subjectivity). Similarly, intersubjectivity implies the expression of attention to the attitudes and beliefs of the hearer (Closs Traugott 2003). More concretely, then, not any speaker-/hearer-reference is subjective respectively intersubjective, since not any speaker-/hearer-reference express attention to attitudes or beliefs. While (1) is clearly subject and expresses the speaker's attitude, (2) contains a speaker-reference (*I*) but does not express the speaker's attitude or belief. Similarly, while (3) is intersubjective in that it takes into account the hearer's attitudes, (4) mentions the hearer but does not contain information concerning his/her attitudes and beliefs.

(1)   *I think you're fantastic.* (English)
(2)   *I leave at 4pm.* (English)
(3)   *You must be so proud.* (English)
(4)   *You don't live here anymore, do you?* (English)

        This attention to the speaker/hearer's attitudes and beliefs can then be formulated very explicitly (e.g. through the use of cognition verbs, such as *I think*) or can be rather implicit. It is especially the rather implicit ways of taking into account the speaker's or hearer's attitude that will be relevant in this paper. More concretely, with respect to referentially ambiguous person reference, I will argue that this ambiguity is created and/or exploited in order to allow for or enhance attention to the interlocutor's attitudes. Such uses are in line with the fact that some genres rely more heavily on hearer attention than others.

        The difference between genres has long since been described in terms of subjectivity – albeit that the different authors who do so, use slightly different concepts of subjectivity, and tend to focus on the distinction between spoken and written language. As signalled by J. Lyons (1994: 15), "Subjectivity in so far as it is manifest in language – locutionary subjectivity – is situationally and stylistically differentiated. So, too, is the degree of subjectivity that is manifest in different styles and in different situations." Dahl (2000: 58) specifies that written genres have a much lower degree of subjectivity than spoken genres. Language-specific corpus-based analyses of the genre- and register-specificity of subjectivity have been proposed for English (Scheibman 2002) and Spanish (Vázquez-Rozas & García-Miguel 2006; De Cock 2010, 2014, 2015). Thus, Scheibman considers that subjectivity plays a very important role in English informal interaction: "In interactive discourse, English-speaking participants are more likely to explicitly mark their contributions as based in their own viewpoints than in formal genres, which tend towards a covertly subjective style (e.g. Biber 1988). (…) It is also the case that in these more formal language styles, relative to conversation, there is less interaction among participants" (Scheibman 2002: 171). Vázquez Rozas & García-Miguel (2006) have pointed out the higher subjectivity of spoken Spanish in comparison with written Spanish and I have shown (De Cock 2015) that subjectivity and intersubjectivity contribute to creating a more fine-grained typology of different spoken languages genres, beyond the spoken-written dichotomy. In this paper, I will argue that the intersubjective effect of certain person reference strategies, understood as taking into account the interlocutor, rather than the referentially ambiguous use itself, is crucial in order to explain the way these strategies function in certain genres and registers. Boundaries between genres are of course often vague (Saukkonen 2003). Similarly, various authors have argued that the oral-written distinction is scalar rather than dichotomous and crosscut by other axes such as planned-unplanned (Ochs 1979) or proximity and distance (Koch & Oesterreicher 1985).

3. Methodology

Given that referential ambiguity is situated at a pragmatic level, not at a formal level

(though formal factors may play a role in favoring or disfavoring certain interpretations), an automated corpus search is not possible. Moreover, as we will see, frequencies of the phenomena studied in this paper vary greatly, and may not always correspond to native speakers' guesses concerning the frequency of a certain strategy. As a result of this dichotomy between perceived frequency and real frequency, these phenomena pose particular challenges to corpus research and to our concept of prototypicity. I will discuss examples from different genres and registers, referring to quantitative data or tendencies whenever possible. Yet, in view of the research question and of these methodological challenges, some examples are taken from (re)created interaction, such as dialogues in novels and TV-series. They are particularly interesting since authors choose them in order to create a certain narrative setting, thereby revealing their perceived interactional effect. In addition, I will discuss metadiscursive comments by the author and / or a character on these referentially ambiguous uses. Thus, this paper includes not only naturally occurring (corpus) data but also data from artistic productions which may offer insights into the perceived effect and rhetorical value of these referentially ambiguous uses.

4. *You, me, everybody*! (The Blues Brothers): On the generic 2nd person singular

'Generic' is a misleading term in these cases, since one actually distinguishes two main strands (for a more elaborate analysis of 2nd person singular forms, see Kluge 2012, also this volume). On the one hand, truly 'generic' uses, implying a universal reading as in (5) and, on the other hand, speaker-referring uses, where the speaker is actually talking about him/herself in the 2nd person (6). As such, starting from a *you*, the reference may include *me* and/or *everybody*.

(5)   *You must look right before crossing the street.* (English)
(6)   *You don't know what to do when he looks at you that way.* (English)

        A third, less frequently mentioned type, is the use of a 2nd person to refer to a specific (not generic) third person. In other words, the speaker asks the interlocutor to imagine him/herself in the situation of yet another person (cf. Kluge's 2012 proposal on generic seconds as references to characters in mental spaces), for instance as the absent-minded mother of the speaker (7) or as the child of the speaker (8). In the latter case, note that the speaker asks the interlocutor to sympathize successively with the child (born in December) and the mother (desperately looking for a kindergarten for her child).

(7)

        *En el momento en el que **vas a guardar, que no sabes** dónde ¡pum!, **aprovechas aquello. P**ero no es una cosa que **hayas pensado** hacerla ni mucho menos, y luego, no **te vuelves a acordar...** (Spanish)
        'At the moment that **you are going to keep [it] that you don't know where,** pum!, **you use that.** But it's not something that **you have thought to do, even less,** and then, **you don't remember.'** (daughter about absent-minded mother) (CORLEC-acon006a)

(8)   *Als **ge dan geboren zijt** in december, **vindt ge** geen kleuterschool meer.*
            (Belgian Dutch)
            'If **you're born** in December, **you can't find** a kindergarten anymore.' (mother on
            difficulties to find a school for her child, example recorded by author).

Most accounts of this phenomenon have in some way presented it as divergent from classical standards or, in various languages, as a recently emerging use due to the influence of English as a lingua franca (various authors quoted in Tarenskeen 2010). However, the long-term existence has been amply demonstrated[2]. The historical presence in various languages invalidates both the idea that this phenomenon is recent and the idea that the rise of English as a worldwide lingua franca lies at the heart of this phenomenon (see among others counter-evidence for this belief in Jensen 2009; Gregersen & Jensen 2016 this volume). Yet, longitudinal studies on French (Thibault 1991) and Danish (Jensen 2009) show an increase in the frequency of 2nd person singular forms, which may have contributed to the opinion that these uses are recent.

The Spanish generic 2nd person singular was moreover typically considered a Latin-American phenomenon (Kany 1969: 129). The presumed link between the diatopic and diastratic explanation can also be a side-effect of the preference for spoken data (which were considered to be more authentic) in the diatopic research. The diatopic research thus brought to the fore some spoken language phenomena, which are not necessarily limited to Latin-American Spanish. According to other accounts, it is a spoken language phenomenon as opposed to the written language, where *uno* is preferred (Vila Pujol 1987). From a register-based perspective, this use has been considered a sign of oral and/or informal language (Vila Pujol 1987; Hidalgo Navarro 1996 for Spanish; various authors quoted in Tarenskeen 2010 for Dutch), as opposed to more written or formal equivalents (e.g. *uno* in Spanish, *one* in English, *men* in Dutch[3]). The generic 2nd person singular form, especially in its self-referring use, has in various languages given rise to claims concerning a supposed origin in sports interviews or speech of sportsmen (Bennis et al. 2004: 28-29 call it typical for *voetbal-Nederlands* 'soccer Dutch', see Kluge 2016 this volume for further examples from sportsmen and -women).

When looking at research on the frequency of these uses, we observe that generic seconds are in any case not a rare phenomenon. De Hoop and Tarenskeen (2014) found almost half of 2nd person singular forms to be generic in informal Dutch and Jensen signals a similar 38% in the LANCHART corpus[4]. The referentially ambiguous 2nd person singular (including generic but also speaker-referring uses) is also pervasive in Spanish where 10% of 2nd person singular uses in Spanish informal conversation were found to be generic and 15% of (informal) 2nd person singular uses in Spanish TV-debates (De Cock 2012, 2014). Kluge (2012) finds 25% of generic 2nd person singular

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[2] For Spanish, Ynduráin (1969) on novels and Kluge (2010), citing Hidalgo Navarro (1996: 170), confirm the long since existence of a 2nd person form as a self-referring strategy (Ynduráin 1969). Especially in (religious) law-texts, a generic 2nd person form, used to formulate a universal law, is attested in older texts such as the bible or ancient Icelandic texts (Grimm 1866).

[3] Due to the high frequency of French *on* and its varied functions among others with 1st person plural reference, the relation between a generic 2nd person singular and *on* is more complex than the relationship between the 2nd person singular and *uno, one, men* (see Stewart 1995 and Kluge 2012).

[4] Personal communication Torben Juel Jensen, 02/04/2013.

uses to be generic in C-ORAL-Rom[5] (as compared to 21% for French), when considering tokens where the hearer can be conceptualized as a representative of a larger entity. Even more interestingly, we can observe a generic 2nd person singular in Spanish parliamentary debate (9), though, admittedly, this is a very rare case (the only one in the corpus analyzed) (De Cock 2014: 263). Informal address as such is in this genre not allowed, yet the generic nature (in this case with a clear speaker-reference) licenses its use. The generic reading is furthermore created not only by the 2nd person singular but also by the indefinite pronoun *uno* 'one', which shows the importance of taking into account the broader context for the analysis of referentially ambiguous pronouns.

(9)   *A quien no le puede dar alegría (...) representar a quien simboliza las ideas que*
         *uno ha defendido toda **tu vida**.* (Congreso 2001, Zapatero). (Spanish)
         'Who would not be happy to represent whom symbolizes the ideas one has defended
             all **your life**.'

The rareness of this counterexample seems to confirm that a generic 2nd person singular is the odd man out in formal genres. Yet, its important presence in informal conversation and TV-debates shows that this use must not be considered specific of sportsmen or of less literate language use altogether. Kluge (2016 this volume) includes examples taken from interviews with politicians, where interaction is more intense and formality is lower than in other types of political discourse, such as parliamentary debate. Also Gregersen & Jensen (2016 this volume) show that, while Danish generic *du* may be used in very different contexts, its use differs according to genre and (discursive) activity type.

Both with a generic interpretation and a speaker-referring interpretation, the function of this particular use seems to be to ask the interlocutor to imagine him-/herself in the position of the person referred, cf. 'situational insertion' (Laberge & Sankoff 1979: 428) or the creation of a mental space (Rubba 1996; Kluge 2012). In terms of intersubjectivity, its requesting the interlocutor to imagine in the position of the real agent or experiencer of the verb, is a way of paying attention (and appealing to) the interlocutor's attitudes, since the interlocutor can (but need not) feel included. As such, the referential ambiguity as to whether the interlocutor is being referred to or not, is crucial to the functioning of the strategy. Indeed, the fact that the interlocutor may find him/herself one day in the position of the agent or experiencer is exactly the main effect of this strategy. Such intersubjective strategies are more usual in genres where the interaction with the interlocutor and, especially, the need for empathy, is great.[6] This is not only the case for sportsmen who seek to relate to their fans. Indeed, we find this strategy very frequently in informal conversation and TV-debates, but also in more specific interaction types, such as complaints formulation. For the effectiveness of a complaint, it is crucial that the interlocutor adopts the point of view of the speaker and, thus, proves him/her right, as in (10).

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[5] Since this is a comparable corpus of different Romance languages, consisting of different genres and registers, it allows for a broader corpus basis concerning this type of pragmatic phenomena.

[6] Bladas and Nogué (2016 this volume) analyze a grammaticalized use of Catalan *tu* as interjection, which may be linked to this referentially ambiguous use, and include a Spanish example as well.

(10)   *And you can hear a lot through the walls.* (English example cited in Stokoe & Hepburn 2005: 65)

From a more commercial or jocular perspective, the following advertisement (11) for snore-free rooms in a Carlton Hotel clearly appeals to the interlocutor's personal experience in order to convince him or her of booking the room. Note that the spokeswoman first creates a group feeling of snoring victims through 1st person plural *we*, which counters the possible face threat of acknowledging that one's partner snores. Then, a 2nd person singular form is used, which can be interpreted as straightforward deictic hearer-reference (addressing the potential client), self-reference (mainly induced by the preceding 1st person plural form) or a more generic reading (induced by the use of *allemaal* 'all' and our general knowledge that spokespersons address more than one addressee). This ambiguity is by no means exceptional, as was already signaled by Bolinger (1979: 207), yet in the very vast majority it does not lead to misunderstandings (see Kluge this volume). Indeed, its ambiguity is what makes for the intersubjective effect of the 2nd person singular. It is thus not an error or weakness, but rather an asset.

(11)   *We hebben het allemaal al meegemaakt. Klaarwakker om 3 uur 's ochtends en **je hoofd** verstoppen onder een kussen om het gesnurk van **je partner** niet te horen.* (Dutch)
'We've all been through it. Wide awake at 3am and hiding **your head** under the pillow so as to no longer hear **your partner** snoring.'
(Crowne Plaza spokeswoman on campaign for anti-snoring room http://www.blikopnieuws.nl/bericht/131011/Belgen_komen_tot_rust_in_hotel_met_%2018antisnurkkamer.html - page last accessed 07/07/2011)

But also in other commercial interaction types, the interlocutor has to take up the speaker's position, e.g. in mystery shopping reports. Mystery shopping consists in a mystery person (viz. unknown to the company) shopping in a certain store or, in general, presenting him/herself as a normal user of a certain service (bank, public services such as library). The aim of these reports is to offer the management on-the-ground information on the functioning of its services or stores. Indeed, the mystery shopper takes up the position the manager would like to have, that is, experiencing 'incognito' how the company works. Thus, the use of a speaker-referring *you* in mystery shopping crystallizes the whole idea behind this specific referentially ambiguous pronoun: The speaker (*I*) does what the interlocutor (*you*) would like to do (12) and has literally taken the place of the addressee. The speaker-referring *you* is, then, a way to put the interlocutor in the position that he/she would have liked to take up.

(12)   *When **you** enter the shop, there is no one to welcome **you**.*[7] (English)

From a literary perspective, Paul Auster explains his choice to write his novel

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[7] This is a constructed example, since the original examples on which the observation was based, could not be reproduced here due to confidentiality issues with mystery shopping reports.

Winter journal in a self-referring 2nd person (13) as "the only possible way to write it. The *I* was too exclusive (…); *he*, then, sounds too distant. The *you* makes the reader an accomplice by which the book is not as much about my life, my fears and doubts, as about anyone who sees the face of death" (Interview in Knack Focus 02/05/2012: 28). This summarizes quite accurately the effect authors/speakers may wish to obtain: Make the interlocutor an accomplice.

(13)   *You think it will never happen to you, that it cannot happen to you, that you are the only person in the world to whom none of these things will ever happen, and then, one by one, they all begin to happen to you, in the same way they happen to everyone else.* (Auster 2012: 1, opening line) (English)

De Hoop and Hogeweg (2014) similarly offer examples of literary uses of generic 2nd person forms in Dutch, in order to enhance identification with the narrator.

5. *We* becomes *you*: Other-reference by means of 1st person plural

Whereas the generic 2nd person singular is typically linked to a specific type of speaker, the hearer-dominant *we* (sometimes termed we$_{you}$) is often associated with specific interaction situations, such as teacher-student, doctor-patient (Quirk et al. 1985: 350; Brown & Levinson 1987: 119), parent-child relationships, in other words, authority relationships characterized by power asymmetry, where the authority figure uses the 1st person plural form to address the person lacking authority (Iglesias Recuero 2001; Siewierska 2004: 223). It is referentially ambiguous in that a 1st person plural form, which is conceptualized as including speaker and hearer, is used in order to refer to the hearer only, as in (14).

(14)   *Have we taken our medicine?* (Brown & Levinson 1987: 119) (English)

Quantitative data of this phenomenon exist only for Spanish, where less than 0.05% of 1st person plural forms in spoken language turn out to be cases of this hearer-dominant 1st person plural (De Cock 2011: 2764). The difficulty to find authentic examples, even in specific corpora of genres and contexts typically associated with this strategy, such as classroom discourse, is a further sign that it is actually rather rare and, in any case, much less frequent than perceived by speakers. The created examples authors use to illustrate this phenomenon evoke the authority relationships with which this phenomenon is typically associated (14).

Note that the strategy is considered a solidarity strategy by Brown & Levinson (1987: 119). The speaker establishes a shared responsibility with the interlocutor. The intersubjective effect consists in portraying a joint action or shared responsibility, instead of portraying the interlocutor as sole responsible. It is not infrequent in these relationships that the speaker effectively assists the interlocutor in the completion of the required action, e.g. eating, putting on clothes etc., as could be the case for (14), but certainly not for (16). In addition, this hearer-dominant may alternate with a genuine inclusive *we* aiming at creating a sense of partnership between the participant and the doctor as in (15) or, even more frequently, with uses that may be interpreted as inclusive

(referring to doctor and patient as partners in the decision-making process on the patients' welfare) or as exclusive (referring to the doctor or a team of doctors) (16).

(15)   *We should wait for the speech therapist.* (quoted in Skelton et al. 2002: 485) (English)

(16)   *We'll do that then.* (doctor commenting on treatment, quoted in Skelton et al. 2002: 487) (English)

As shown in Borthen (2010) for Norwegian and De Cock (2011) for English and Spanish, these uses are, however, not limited to the classical authority relationships described in the literature, but they also occur among participants that have equal status in the interaction, e.g. among partners or friends. In such cases, the authority relationship hypothesis is difficult to sustain. Yet, from an intersubjectivity perspective, we can argue that intersubjectivity is certainly at stake since the speaker wishes to show involvement towards the interlocutor, as a means to show empathy and/or to persuade him/her of doing the task. Moreover, in restaurants, waiters may address their clients by means of a 1st person plural, at least in Spanish and Italian. This use of a hearer-dominant *we* by the waiter may seem surprising since one may assume that the clients are being treated with deference and that the authority relationship is constructed rather the other way round, that is, the waiter is in an 'inferior' position. Bazzanella (2002: 248) claims that in Italian restaurants this use is only acceptable towards regular clients, where a solidarity interpretation prevails, whereas its use towards new clients would be inappropriate because of the asymmetry assumption. The interplay between the type of relationship this strategy is typically associated with, versus the variety of relationships it actually occurs in, creates then a complex situation of (perceived) (im)politeness. However, in my own experience this form of address is, at least in Spanish, used towards entirely new clients as well without being considered impolite.

While the intersubjectivity may seem motivated by empathy towards the hearer and seem polite in a Brown and Levinson's sense or 'politic' in Watts' sense (2003), it may still be perceived as impolite, condescending or rude in a commonsensical approach of politeness (Quirk et al. 1985: 350). Especially adults do not always appreciate being addressed this way, possibly due to the association with teacher-(young) student interaction or to the idea that their control or capacity of the situation is being undermined by not being addressed individually. In addition, it is shown that inclusive *we* as an expression of partnership in doctor-patient-relationships is very much the monopoly of doctors, indicating that, altogether, a certain asymmetry in the relationship persists (Skelton et al. 2002: 487).

Its strong association to certain authority situations, also in society large, is illustrated among others by excerpt (17) from the novel *Cloud Atlas*.

(17)   *Mr Cavendish? Are we awake?* (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* 2004: 369) (English)

The utterance opens a chapter where the main character finds himself – in his own view – 'locked up' in a caring home for the elderly against his will. It should be noted that the previous chapter involves other characters and is not situated in the setting of a caring home at all. Thus, the author has to create a new narrative setting. The fact

that he uses specifically this referentially ambiguous 1st person plural use to evoke a nurse-patient relationship relies on our stereotypical association of hearer-dominant *we* with this type of discourse context.[8]

A rather atypical example of hearer-dominant *we* comes from the TV-series *Brothers & Sisters,* where a lawyer finds a strategy to put checkmate to a man who wants to blackmail the lawyer's client (a US senator running for president). After explaining to the man why he cannot possibly win, the lawyer utters (18). He thereby clearly refers to the interlocutor, who must now leave, and not to the lawyer, who will obviously stay in his own office. In addition, the interlocutor clearly interprets the 1st person plural as hearer-dominant, since he understands that he (alone) is the addressee and leaves the office. Such cases reveal that the construction is not necessarily limited to a certain genre or interaction type, but cocreates the authority relationship (by taking the decision of walking out the door for someone else) that may then turn out to be a constitutive characteristic of the interaction.

(18)   *This is where we walk out the door.* (Baitzer 2006)

The *Brothers & Sisters* example is clearly impolite. Indeed, a (perceived) mismatch between the solidarity strategy and a real (lack of) feeling of solidarity can cause a rude effect (De Cock 2011). Such rude effect is clearly intended by the lawyer in (18), but it is probably not intended in the case of doctor/nurse-patient interaction (14-16). In the latter, the interlocutor may perceive the solidarity strategy as invalid because (s)he perceives the interlocutor e.g. as an 'opposite party' or as too young or too low in rank (in the case of nurses) to be 'equal'.

While it has been suggested that the interpretation of these referentially ambiguous uses is achieved through world-knowledge, most examples do include more (para)verbal signs of hearer-orientation, such as vocatives (17), hearer-oriented discourse markers and interrogative constructions (14) or, in the *Brothers and Sisters* example (18), a pointing gesture. Once again, the referential ambiguity is crucial for the intersubjective and polite effect of the strategy.

We have shown that this particular ambiguous strategy may be found in many different genres. They seem to share one crucial characteristic, namely their interactional nature. The switch from a first person plural form to a 2nd person singular (or plural) reference seems to be restricted to situations within an interactional dyad. In most examples, other elements indicate the interactive nature of the discourse situation, e.g. the interrogative mode and the pointing gesture, related to physical proximity.

6. Self-reference by means of 1st person plural

The third case under discussion is the use of the 1st person plural for speaker-reference. The referential ambiguity then consists in whether the reference is plural, including the speaker and someone else, or not. As opposed to the two preceding strategies, this

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[8] The use of this construction in jokes and humoristic discourse similarly confirms that there is a typical association of this hearer-dominant use with a specific interaction type.

phenomenon is more frequent in written discourse – or spoken discourse types with a strong written preparation – as will be shown in this section.

Interestingly, this strategy is a coin with, at first sight, two paradoxical sides. On the one hand, there is the pluralis maiestatis (the plural of kings) (section 6.1) and, on the other hand, the pluralis modestiae (plural of modesty, also called author's plural) (section 6.2). Compare the following definitions: Pluralis maiestatis is "the speaker by making himself plural precludes the possibility of a normal reciprocal relationship" (Siewierska 2004: 218), whereas the plural of modesty aims to "detract attention from self and suggest joint rather than single authorship" (ibid.). While the pluralis maiestatis and pluralis modestiae have been most frequently quoted in the literature, I will show in this section that in other contexts also laypersons may use the 1st person plural in a referentially ambiguous way, for self-reference (section 6.3).

Though no formal differences can be observed, the former is a way to show authority and (very) high social status, the latter, quite the opposite, was considered a sign of modesty and of not presenting oneself as the only author. The interpretation rarely causes problems, as we may draw on some very well-defined criteria for each use. Indeed, both are restricted to a very specific type of speaker and context, and their use is part of cultural conventions (Bazzanella 2002: 247). Whereas the use of the pluralis maiestatis is restricted to kings and queens, the plural of modesty, also called 'author's plural' is equally restricted to a group of persons and to specific academic discourse types. The author's plural is moreover rather language-specific, as commented on below in more detail.

6.1. *Pluralis maiestatis*

The pluralis maiestatis consists in amplifying the reference to a person to signal his/her importance, typically kings or queens, emperors, the pope. This use is similar to the use of a 2nd person plural address form as a sign of deference to a singular addressee (e.g. French *vous* or formerly Spanish *vos*). Brown & Gilman (1960: 255) link the Latin origin of plural address for emperors to the fact that there were two emperors (respectively for the Western and Eastern Roman empire). The pluralis maiestatis could then mirror this plural address or simply be linked to the fact that an emperor represents the people. Given the restrictions on the use of a pluralis maiestatis, no corpus data are available on its use and, indeed, they would be rather void.

Nowadays, the pluralis maiestatis as self-reference seems to disappear from kings' discourses throughout Europe, as a secondary result of the democratisation process (Wales 1996; Nogué Serrano 2008: 194). Thus, the current Belgian and Spanish king use a 1st person plural only when talking about their spouse and themselves, or about the whole nation, not when referring to themselves only. As such, the use of a 1st person plural form has shifted from self-reference to reference to the couple as a team. A true plural of kings, for self-reference only, is maintained, though, in the formulaic language of written texts, such as legislation.

Interestingly, the pluralis maiestatis (re)appears in other authority figures. Notoriously, then British prime minister Margaret Thatcher used 1st person plurals for self-reference. Whereas the 1st person plural could be interpreted as referring to Thatcher

and her government and/or team in (19), the reference in (20) can only be to herself. But also George W. Bush Senior and John Major recurred to it (Wales 1996: 64).

(19)   *We are* happy *we are leaving* the UK in a very, very much better state. (Thatcher in Wales 1996: 65) (English)
(20)   *We are* a grandmother now. (Thatcher in Wales 1996: 65) (English)

Whereas the initial use of a pluralis maiestatis had as intersubjective effect that the royal speaker, by occupying a plural position, overshadowed the other interlocutors, in current days the use of a 1st person plural by kings and queens to refer to the royal couple or to society at large, establishes a much more intersubjective relationship with the interlocutors.

In spite of its gradual disappearance from spoken language, the symbolic value of the pluralis maiestatis is apparent from its use in the imitation of kings and queens. Wales (1996: 64) signals the frequent use of the pluralis maiestatis in 'royalese', viz. imitation of royal discourse in a humoristic context, such as satire.

6.2. *Pluralis modestiae*

The pluralis modestiae, also called authors' plural, authorial plural, plural of modesty, is the use of a 1st person plural form to refer to the singular author of a scientific piece of writing (and, less frequently, a scientific talk). Though originally considered a sign of modesty, the old-fashioned connotation that this plural has acquired with some public, may give rise to a rather pompous impression in some contexts. Indeed, the use (and acceptability) of an author's plural of modesty seems to vary greatly according to language (see among others Paquot 2010: 189-192 on the influence of the mother tongue on the use of the 1st person plural of in academic writing by English foreign language learners; Molino 2010 on the contrast between English and Italian) and discipline (Harwood 2005). Harwood (2005) found an overwhelming use of exclusive *we* (authorial reference) in physics and computing sciences articles, but hardly any in economics and business and management journals. In addition, the plural of modesty refers only to exclusive uses (viz., where a single author could also use *I*), yet authors often also use inclusive *we* in order to describe or critique disciplinary practice or treat methodology issues (Harwood 2005: 355-361). In the latter case, the author clearly seeks to create a shared point of view with the reader, thus adopting an intersubjective perspective (see also metadiscursive comments in Hyland 2001: 559-560). Frequent shifting between inclusive and exclusive uses (the latter being the plural of modesty) may be seen as an unintended effect (Biber et al. 1999: 330) or as an exploitation of the referentially ambiguity in order to make the reader feel involved (Harwood 2005: 346). In (21), for instance, the author heavily relies on joint experiences concerning the importance of interaction for social life (*usamos* 'we use', *conversamos* 'we converse'), before referring to the definition used in this paper (*entendemos* 'we understand') and passing on to a resolutely authorial metadiscursive comment (*señalábamos* 'we pointed out').

(21)   *La conversación es, además, el medio por excelencia que **usamos** para relacionarnos con los demás, pues **conversamos** con el fin de comunicar información a otras personas, pero más aún, para establecer y mantener contactos sociales con ellas. Debido a esto, un extranjero que no sepa participar en una conversación tampoco conseguirá tener una relación de confianza con los hablantes de la lengua meta y perderá toda posibilidad de participar y de integrarse plenamente en la vida social y cultural de esa comunidad. (...) Los estudios acerca de la competencia conversacional en lengua extranjera (tal y como la **entendemos** en este artículo) son, como **señalábamos** antes, esporádicos y aislados (...)* (García García 2005) (Spanish)

'Conversation is, moreover, the most adequate means **we use** to establish relationships with the others, since **we converse** with the aim to communicate information to other persons, but even more to establish and maintain social contacts with them. For that reason, a foreigner who is not capable to participate in a conversation, will not be able to obtain a relationship of trust with speakers of the target language and will use every possibility to participate and to fully integrate in the social and cultural life of that community (…) Studies on spoken language competence in foreign language (such as **we understand** it in this article) are, as **we have pointed** out before, sporadic and isolated (…)'

Though jokes on (older) professors using a pluralis modestiae outside the realm of academic discourse circulate widely, no real-life (not jocularly intended) spoken example of this use was found.

6.3. *Other cases of self-reference by means of a 1st person plural*

However, not only kings and authors use a 1st person plural form for self-reference. Another example was provided by Belgian former cyclist Rudy Ceyssens's utterance during a TV-show (22).

(22)   *Ondertussen **hebben we** 30 kilo **bijgekregen**.* (Dutch)
          'In the meantime, **we've gained** 30 kilos.' (Rudy Ceyssens)

In this case, the speaker seeks to share responsibility usually for a negative or embarrassing situation, such as going from being an athletic young man to a less well-shaped person. These daily use examples of a 1st person plural referring to the speaker show that not only pluralis maiestatis and pluralis modestiae are uses of a 1st person plural with a speaker-only reference. Interestingly, these everyday uses have rarely been documented. The pluralis maiestatis and pluralis modestiae have received far more attention, probably in view of their pertaining to more formal and written genres which have long been more documented and more amply described. In everyday language use, such as (22), the speaker clearly appeals to the intersubjective construction of the action and tries to gain involvement and empathy or, even, a sense of shared responsibility from the interlocutor.

Example (23) from a detective novel illustrates not only the attempt by the speaker to share responsibility for an embarrassing situation but also includes a metadiscursive comment by the hearer. Curt, a pathologist, has committed an

embarrassing error in his initial examination of a skeleton and tries to explain how this was possible. He introduces this explanation by *if we're looking for excuses*. Yet, his interlocutor, detective Rebus, clearly tackles this use by asking *What's with the 'we'?* By doing so, he signals that he is aware of Curt's using a plural form to erase the fact that he is the sole responsible.

(23)   *'If **we're looking** for excuses', Curt began, '**we might mention** the initial inadequate lighting (...)'*
'What's with the 'we'?' Rebus teased. (Rankin 2005: 33) (English)

To sum up, with speaker-referring 1st person plural forms, we see that referential ambiguity is exploited to either convey new meanings (such as the royal couple as a team or as representative of society at large) or to create an intersubjective effect towards the hearer, namely convincing him/her (in the case of inclusive readings in academic discourse) or gaining empathy and shared responsibility.

7. Conclusion

I have shown in this paper that referentially ambiguous uses may be found across various genres, registers and discourse contexts, and not only in the context they are typically associated with. This should, however, not lead to totally dismissing the link between certain genres or discourse contexts and certain referentially ambiguous uses. Rather, they contribute to the discussion concerning genre characteristics and the methodological challenges to define prototypicity of examples: From a quantitative perspective, none of the strategies presented above proves to be solidly prototypical of a certain genre. However, the fact that native speakers spontaneously establish some use-genre or use-discourse context associations suggests that they can be considered prototypical from a more cognitive perspective. In addition, the symbolic or representative value is also apparent in purposefully creative language use, such as literary production, jokes, caricatures, which can only be effective because many readers/hearers share the presupposition that the strategy in question is typical for the recreated discourse context.

In the preceding sections, I have shown that each case of referential ambiguity can be considered an implicitly intersubjective strategy. This sheds new light on the assumed genre-specificity. Indeed, we obtain a more satisfying link between referential ambiguity and genre if we take into account intersubjectivity as a genre characteristic. The presence of referentially ambiguous uses of personal pronouns is then related to genres and discourse contexts where persuasion or empathy is crucial. In the case of pluralis maiestatis and pluralis modestiae, the crucial feature is not as much triggering empathy but creating a specific type of relationship between the speaker/writer and the hearer/reader. This is in line with other data concerning intersubjective effect in genre. The notorious exception is academic writing which is often claimed to be neutral and objective, yet corpus data show clear signs of authorial presence and of 1st person plural forms aiming to create reader involvement.

I have shown, then, that the analysis of referentially ambiguous uses of person

pronouns in different languages point at similar conclusions as to their genre-specificity. On the one hand, they are much more genre-pervasive than typically assumed and, as such, merit a more prominent place in language descriptions. On the other hand, their functioning and genre preferences may be more accurately described when taking into account intersubjectivity as an important factor in their use.

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