Book Reviews


Pronouns are a less than straightforward part of speech. Their simplistic definition as nominal structures that stand in lieu of nouns is of limited epistemic worth, particularly in the frequent cases when the deixis of pronouns becomes social deixis, as is the case with personal pronouns, for example. The volume edited by Paul Bouissac, inspired by a panel at the 2015 International Pragmatics association conference, endeavours to compare the social aspects of pronouns in a wide variety of European and Asian languages.

In the first chapter, “N-V-T, a framework for the analysis of social dynamics in address pronouns”, Manuela Cook deals with address forms, which are still often described in terms of a T/V dichotomy of intimate vs. formal address, following the terminology developed by Roger Brown and Albert Gilman in the 1960s. Cook proposes a ternary system adding a N (neutral) address form to T and V. In some languages, such as Swedish, the old T pronoun has become the N pronoun, in others such as English, it is the old V pronoun that has become the neutral (or in this case, only) pronominal address form. Other languages again, such as European Portuguese, have a ternary T-N-V system of address forms. Like other chapters in the volume, Cook’s contribution shows that in regard to social deixis, pronouns as defined as a part of speech in traditional grammar cannot be analysed in isolation from nouns. While in English, the T and V address is exclusively expressed with nouns (usually as vocatives), the Portuguese V address o senhor / a senhora is used syntactically as a pronoun.

In “When we means you: the social meaning of English pseudo-inclusive personal pronouns”, Nick Wilson deals with the clusivity of personal pronouns in English and its social functions. Focussing on the first person plural pronoun we, Wilson uses his quantitative and qualitative analyses of interactions among players and coaches in a club rugby team in New Zealand to show how
frequent use of we in a pseudo-inclusive function by coaches puts them symbolically within the team of the players and allows them to present direct criticism and directives in pragmatically mitigated form.

Monica Rector and Marcelo da Silva Amorim, in their chapter “A socio-semiotic approach to the personal pronominal system in Brazilian Portuguese”, provide a look into the substantial regional and social variation of personal pronouns in Brazilian Portuguese and an insight into the social reasons and consequences of personal pronoun usage deviating from traditional grammatical standards.

The significant differences even between the standard varieties of Brazilian and European Portuguese in regard to personal pronouns, particularly address pronouns, is an example of pragmatic variation across pluricentric languages. Manuela Cook looks at the consequences of such variation for the praxis of translation in the chapter “Address pronouns and alternatives: challenges and solutions when translating between two polycentric languages (English and Portuguese)”. For the translation of forms of address between English and Portuguese, languages that not only show considerable national and regional variation, but also have different structural means for addressing (a variety of singular and plural address pronouns in Portuguese vs. the one pronoun you in English, Portuguese being a pro-drop language as opposed to English etc.), Cook recommends to use the N-T-V distinction presented in her other chapter in this volume to categorise forms of address and provide pragmatically equivalent translations for them.

Variation of address forms over time, across regions and social groups, already dealt with in the preceding chapters based on material from other languages, is the focus of the chapter “T-V address practices in Italian: diachronic, diatopic, and diastratic analyses” by Costantino Maeder and Romane Werner. Analysing two large corpora of narrative literature by female and male Italian writers, a diachronic one from 1840 to 1970 and a contemporary one since 1990, the authors aim to test the hypotheses of a rapid change of the system of address pronouns since the unification of Italy in 1861, of a preference of Southern Italians for the V address Voi and of Northern Italians for the V address Lei, and of women generally using more polite language than men. Unsurprisingly, the T address tu has increased over time, while the V pronoun Voi has massively decreased in the contemporary corpus, while it is still rather frequent in the 20th century, mainly in the time of Italian Fascism, when there was a campaign against the “un-Italian” V address Lei. For the same ideological reason, the diachronic corpus shows a counterintuitive prevalence of tu and Lei in the South of Italy and of Voi in the North of the country, while the contemporary corpus corroborates the often reported fact that nowadays, Voi
is a rural and predominantly Southern V form of address. Seemingly contrary to the prevailing notion in gender linguistics that women use more polite language than men, in the text corpus analysed by Maeder and Werner, male writers use significantly more V address than female writers. This, however, is explained by the authors with the tendency of female writers to focus on personal relationships where the T address is much more frequent.

Paul Bouissac also uses literary texts, together with anecdotal evidence, in his chapter “Forms and functions of the French personal pronouns in social interactions and literary texts”. Using his examples from different epochs, text and discourse types, and domains of French more as stations of a tour d’horizon than as the basis of a qualitative or quantitative analysis, the author shows how the social uses of French personal pronouns vastly transcend their basic personal deictic meanings to both reflect and create social relations between interlocutors.

The second half of the collection deals with Asian languages. While Manuela Cook shows in the previous chapters authored by her that the binary T/V distinction of pronominal address suggested in the 1960s and still widely used does not even apply to many European languages, George van Driem demonstrates that it is definitely far too simplistic for a wide scale of deference levels that can be expressed by the three second person pronouns in Nepali and the variation of verbal agreement with any of these pronouns. The chapter “The dynamics of Nepali pronominal distinctions in familiar, casual and formal relationships” shows how the combination of this pronominal and verbal address system with a rich inventory of nominal address forms, such as kinship terms and titles, creates a highly complex system of social deixis. Trying to apply Cook’s suggestion of an N-T-V ternary opposition of address forms to some of the address systems in Asian languages studied in this and some of the further chapters would have linked the two somewhat disjointed parts of the book dealing with European respectively Asian languages better and also kept the promise of a comparative approach given in the title of the volume. Alas, that did not happen and there is hardly any intertextual dialogue between individual chapters.

In “The Chinese pronominal system and identity construction via self-reference”, one of the few chapters in the book not focussing on address, Bing Xue and Shaojie Zhang demonstrate how self-reference by other pronominal and nominal means than the first person singular pronoun in Mandarin Chinese provides the speaker with varied ways of projecting a particular identity of himself or herself within a specific communicative situation.

A further chapter on Chinese, Cher Leng Lee’s “Pronouns in an 18th century Chinese novel: What they tell us about social dynamics”, analyses how in
the classic novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* pronominal reference is used to indicate degrees of politeness and impoliteness within the strictly hierarchical social network of a family by using plural pronouns for single referents and vice versa. Again, the two chapters dealing with Chinese, albeit with rather different approaches, would have provided an opportunity for intertextual dialogue between them, but again this opportunity was not taken.

Code-switching and mixing in Tagalog/English tweets, particularly the importance of mixed and combined use of the respective English and Tagalog first person pronouns for the construction of the tweet author’s multi-layered self, is studied by Dana Osborne in “Me, myself, and ako: locating the self in Taglish tweets”.

Michael C. Ewing and Dwi Noverini Djenar, in their chapter “Address, reference and sequentiality in Indonesian conversation”, describe in detail how the choice from the large Indonesian inventory of second person address and reference forms and their sequential placement helps with the organisation of turn-taking within multi-party interactions.

The final chapter “Pronouns in affinal avoidance registers: evidence from the Aslian languages (Austroasiatic, Malay Peninsula)” by Nicole Kruspe and Niclas Burenhult delivers an insight into the ways pronouns help deal with societal taboos such as linguistic avoidance behaviour in regard to in-laws. This behaviour includes pronominal and vocative substitution as well as naming or addressing taboos, and alternative kinship terms and pronouns only used for in-laws.

This short overview of the chapters shows the wide scope of languages and linguistic behaviours dealt with in the volume. It is certainly an advantage of the book that it covers languages of European origin as well as Asian languages and includes less researched languages such as Nepali or Austroasiatic languages spoken on the Malay Peninsula. Similarly varied are the methodological approaches of the individual chapters, from corpus-based empirical studies of recorded conversation or fictional literature to translation studies and more theoretical discussions. Anyone interested in the comparative analysis of pronouns and particularly of address forms across languages and cultures will find rich pickings in the volume.

Of course, an edited volume can never deliver a complete overview of a field of research. In the introduction, the volume editor lists a number of limitations the collection has, such as a lack of focus on a variety of gender and number aspects in pronominal systems or on phenomena of local deixis in third person pronouns (p. 12). However, a problem with this collection (as with many edited volumes) that could have been avoided is the lack of internal coherence between the individual chapters. Inconsistencies across and even within the
lists of references of different chapters are the smallest problem, but minimally comparable chapter structures would have given the volume more structural consistency. And since many chapters focus on pronouns within a specific context (such as forms of address) and deal with nominal as well as pronominal structures, a basic working definition of “pronoun” common to all contributions in the volume would have both given it more thematic consistency and more clearly justified the comparative approach emphasised in the volume title, as would have some intertextual dialogue between chapters. Since both structural and thematic consistency is weak, the individual chapters are highly interesting and worth reading, but their combination to a volume appears somewhat random. Given that the collection does not simply gather papers presented at a thematic conference panel but adds apparently invited contributions to the original four panel presentations (p. 1 of the introduction), there would have been the chance for a truly comparative approach of the volume.

Heinz L. Kretzenbacher | ORCID: 0000-0002-2737-8236
Senior Lecturer, School of Languages and Linguistics
The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia
heinz@unimelb.edu.au