

“Mother-in-law, my, we know her!”

The role of personal pronouns in constructions of a female identity

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Abstract

Language constructs and reproduces different types of generalizations, for example concerning gender categories. By way of certain linguistic choices speakers construct or reproduce identities for men and women and other categories. Specific lexical and functional items are used for this purpose, consciously and unconsciously. One linguistic item that is used for this purpose is the personal pronoun. This article provides an analysis of data extracts taken from a Danish magazine with the aim of illustrating how personal pronouns contribute to the construction of identities related to particular categories, mainly a female identity, and serve a particular purpose in interaction with other elements in context.

Keywords discourse, language, identity construction, gender, personal pronouns

Introduction

There is no general agreement as to what extent – if at all – the psychological make-ups of the two sexes are different by nature, but there is no doubt that, discursively, the two sexes are often repre-

sented differently in society. The ways in which male and female identities are represented in society have implications for how individuals are met on different occasions. Fixed images of certain identities maintain people in static roles and contribute to the creation of particular expectations of members of the two sexes. This influences their possibilities in different contexts.

The discursive representation of gender occurs through language. By way of certain choices of lexical and functional items, speakers present the world in particular ways, e.g. by (re)constructing categories and identities. One of the linguistic items used for this purpose is the personal pronoun.

The aim of this article is to illustrate how personal pronouns contribute to the construction of identities related to particular categories, mainly the female identity, and serve a particular purpose in interaction with other elements in context. The interest in a specific linguistic item at a general level means that the article, in contrast to many other discourse analyses, does not take a specific discursive event as its point of departure. This has affected the choice of data, as this does not represent a discursive event as such, but instead has been selected on the basis of the category which has been chosen as an example of the work personal pronouns can do, namely the female category. The article presents a discourse analysis of data extracts taken from the Danish magazine *ALT for damerne* (“All for the ladies”). The analysis centers on the textual level and aims at unfolding the use of personal pronouns in the construction of the female category.

Identity and group constructions

It is well-known that if more traditional views on identity conceive of it as something fixed which belongs to the individual, most recent research in sociolinguistics, social psychology and cultural studies is based on a constructionist view on identity (see for example De Fina et al. 2006, and Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). This article is based on the idea that rather than being reflected in discourse, identity is constructed in discourse. According to this view, people assume different identities on different occasions in alignment with the specific situation. Individuals construct identities for themselves as well as for other people.

As De Fina has observed (2006, 351), we have seen a growing interdisciplinary interest in the field of formation, negotiation, and development of identities. For discourse analysts and sociolinguistics the challenge has been to show not only the centrality of the role of language in the construction and transmission of identities, but also the concrete forms in which and through which language practices index such identities.

Also representatives from social psychology consider the relevance of language and discourse in their approach to identity. An important aspect of identity construction is categorization, because identities are often attached to categories in terms of specific attributes or properties. According to Potter and Wetherell (1987), categorization is an important and pervasive part of people’s discourse. Many stories in for example newspapers will concern people who are described, evaluated and understood not in terms of any unique features of their biography but through their category membership (Potter and Wetherell 1987, 116). Davies and Harré (1990) have also emphasized the role of language in the construction of identity by introducing the concept of *positioning* to denote the discursive production of selves.

Other examples are scholars drawing on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, who argue that identities are constructed “live” in the exchange of talks (see Antaki and Widdicombe 1998).

To access the specific discourse-linguistic approach further, it is relevant to involve van Dijk (2006). He conducts a discourse analytical study of ideology, but it provides tools for analyzing more than pure ideology. According to van Dijk (2006, 116), ideologies are belief systems shared by specific groups, typically in relation to other groups, e.g. one political ideology as opposed to another; *ingroups* and *outgroups*. Group members use discursive structures and strategies to express their ideology, in terms of positive speaking about themselves as well as negative speaking about other groups (van Dijk 2006, 124-125). A speaker speaks *as* a member of a group, and/or addresses the recipient *as* a group member. One of van Dijk’s specific linguistic examples is the personal pronoun *we*, which is typically used to refer deictically to the ingroup of the current speaker. Nevertheless, not all collectivities are ideological. Van Dijk (2006, 120) applies the term *social categories* to those such as gender or ethnicity. As I will explain, his theory on discursive structures, by, for

example, means of the personal pronoun, is also useful in relation to these kinds of collectivities.

Constructing an identity in discourse can be constructing an entirely new category (“those people who...”); it can be reproducing an already constructed category (i.e. making a category relevant), or it can be ascribing some specific attributes to a category (typically but not always by reproducing). With regard to gender, for example, the categories male and female are already constructed, and a lot of attributes have been ascribed to both during history.

In the analysis of the personal pronouns in *ALT for damerne*, I will use the discursive approach to identity presented in this section to show how the use of personal pronouns contribute to constructing different categories / groups and identities, how this happens in interaction with other text elements and the context (that is both the text itself, the profile of the magazine in question and the social context), and uncover what purpose the categories and identities are constructed with. In order to focus on the personal pronouns, specific information about the properties of this linguistic item is needed. This information is provided in the following section.

Personal pronouns

An enunciation always includes a speaker and an addressee. These roles are often marked linguistically by the first- and second-person pronouns. It is a well-known fact that the plural of the first-person pronoun has an inclusive as well as an exclusive use, as in (1) and (2):¹

- (1) Come on, we are leaving now.
- (2) We are fine. How about you?

Furthermore, there are also examples in which the referent apart from the speaker (and possibly the addressee) includes individuals beyond the situation. This is the case in (3), an example which forms part of a reply in an agony column to the problem presented in parenthesis:

- (3) (Q: He has also signaled that he likes me, but he doesn't really act. I believe that I have served myself on a silver platter on a number of occasions, and he could just

have picked me. But nothing much happens).

A: I recognize something there, and it seems to me that this is a typical women’s issue, “serving oneself on a silver platter”. [We]² women seem to think that our body language and signals are very clear. Unfortunately, this is not how it is perceived from the perspective of the opposite sex.³

Whereas (1) and (2) are pure deictic constructions, this is not the case in (3), as it does not only point to referents in the situation. Instead, this type has as its referent a whole group, which in (3) includes the speaker, the hearer and someone else, i.e. all members of the female category. In this example, the speaker, a woman just like the questioner, constructs a female identity; a community to which they both belong. Using this strategy of inclusion, she not only demonstrates comprehension by signaling that she herself knows what it is to be a woman, but also provides an explanation of the perceived problem.

Bennett (2002, 67) points to the fact that politicians amongst others use *we* in an inclusive sense to try to foster some kind of identification of interest between speakers and addressees. Svennevig et al. (2002, 181) make the same point based on the example of the Norwegian king and the Norwegian prime minister, who in their New Year’s speeches to the Norwegian people apply *we* with the aim of constructing a feeling of national community and erasing oppositions of interests.

As we see, an example such as (3) holds some of the features described by van Dijk (2006): the speaker speaks as a member of a group, and she addresses the recipient as another member of the same group. Furthermore, the speaker constructs ingroups and outgroups, women and men, although in this example not in a positive/negative manner.

The pronoun in (3) is followed by a noun that designates the group in question, but this is not always the case. In (4), an example from Gustafsson (2013, 4), translated from Spanish, there is no such noun:

- (4) What an afternoon yesterday. I watched the football match live and we played so badly. What a bad performance! We lost for a good reason.

Despite the omission of the noun, it is easy to grasp that the group/category which is constructed here is a national (or a more local) one which the football team represents and with which the speaker identifies. Gustafsson (2013) introduces the term *unauthentic* or *parasitic* deixis to refer to the phenomenon that the plural first-person pronoun becomes naturalized as an ontological and not an ideological fact. According to Gustafsson (2013, 3), the mechanism is not based on a situational *we*, but on a discursive interpellation (in the sense of Althusser, 1971) which takes this *we* for granted, although it is actually produced as a result of the interpellation, and thus, it is not its precondition.⁴ The phenomenon is the same in (3). Although the existence of the biological sexes cannot be denied, the idea of an identity community is ideological. As the following analysis will show, a huge discursive interpellation exists which takes a female community for granted.

According to Lozano Domingo (1995, 243), so-called women’s magazines apply different strategies to get close to the reader, and these are primarily based on inclusion and have as their goal making the reader recognize herself in the text. The magazines try to erase the boundaries between the roles of the editor and the reader, and instead insist on the shared quality of womanliness; a shared female identity. One of these strategies is the use of personal pronouns. I have already mentioned the inclusive use of *we*, but also the singular second-person pronoun is used with the aim of getting close to the reader. As pointed out by Svennevig et al. (1995, 182), the direct addressing by means of the singular second-person pronoun in mass communication is adopted from personal face-to-face communication and indicates closeness between the participants.

The use of personal pronouns in ALT for damerne

ALT for damerne is a Danish magazine published by Egmont Magazines. On the website of Egmont Magazines, the chief editor presents the magazine as follows:

ALT for damerne includes in-depth interviews about subjects with relevance to you and your everyday life. We present trends in fashion with clothes that you can actually wear and give lots of ideas for your home. We keep you updated on beauty, health and exercise, and give you inspiration for exciting everyday food. You can, of course, also read about the newest films, books and music. Every week.⁵

The title of the magazine explicitly says that it is directed at women – including every woman due to the definite plural form. The presentation of the magazine and the title serve to construct women as a category whose areas of interest include fashion, clothes, homes, beauty, health, food, movies, books and music. In other words, these areas of interest form part of a female identity. Of course, it is not surprising that *ALT for damerne* presents women in a predictable and stereotypical way. The point is that the magazine with its way of explicitly addressing the one sex takes as point of departure an already discursively established difference between the sexes and thereby assumes that their readers identify with this image. This is the point of departure of the content, the language, and the discourse of the magazine, which are the elements that serve to obtain the aim of the magazine: to reach as many buyers as possible.

The analyzed examples are from *ALT for damerne*, No. 8, February 2013, and *ALT for damerne*, No. 9, February 2013. The source of the examples is indicated in parenthesis, the first number referring to the issue of the magazine and the second to the page number.

The first example is composed by the chief editor:

- (5) Are you familiar with the feeling of wanting to know what the nice-looking lady on her way out from the posh shop is carrying in her shopping bag? On the editorial board of *ALT for damerne* we pretty much agree that we enjoy poking our noses in other people's shopping bags. (8, 4)

The example is followed by an uncovering of four recognized designers' purchases with comments from these. In the beginning of the example, the addressee is addressed by the singular second-per-

son pronoun. By way of contrast, *we* is used to refer to representatives from *ALT for damerne*. The adverbial *On the editorial board* marks that *we* is exclusive, as the addressee obviously does not form part of this board. The contrast, however, is erased by suggesting that the reader is just like the members of the editorial board, with the same curiosity when it comes to designers’ shopping. This is an example of a strategy employed to get close to the reader, based on inclusion. Despite the exclusive *we*, this strategy attempts to make the reader recognize herself in the text. The chief editor constructs a kind of community or group and invites the reader to be a member. It is presupposed that the editorial board is a kind of expert in this context and by disclosing their own interests, the reader is indirectly asked to align herself and do the same and thus identify with the group. Having constructed a community and invited the reader to join it, the editorial board might expect that the reader will find the ensuing content more interesting and relevant. Variants of this phenomenon are seen in the following two examples:

- (6) Look after your skin with the facial treatment mask that is best suited for your skin type – we have tested all our facial treatment masks on ourselves! Check out the latest beauty news on ALTfordamerne.dk/skonhed. (8, 14)
- (7) “We really want to get our hands on that!” [We] The fashion editors of *ALT for Damerne* are constantly filled with new impressions from the season’s collections, all kinds of glossy magazines, cool bloggers, and regular visits to the designers’ show rooms. But what do we end up buying when the spring collections hit the stores? Look here and get all the insider tips. (8, 48)

In (6) *we* is also exclusive and refers to representatives of the magazine. The reader is invited to find a facial treatment mask among several which have been tested by the representatives of the magazine. Again the referents of *we* represent experts, and the reader (in this case addressed by the possessive pronoun *your*) is supposed to be interested in following the advice. The referents of *we* in (7) are the fashion editors, i.e. fashion experts. By showing what they themselves buy and offering insider tips, the reader is invited to be

a member of their group – the “smart ones”. Text (8) differs slightly from these examples:

- (8) You can get some very effective treatments at the cosmologist, but if you feel like doing the work yourself, we present a number of new products that can help even out your skin tone and contribute to an even pigmentation. (9, 82)

In this example, the referents of the exclusive *we* do not invite the reader to be a member of a group. But the plural of the first-person pronoun and the singular of the second-person pronoun are used to offer expert advice to the reader.

(6) to (8) play on the overall identity already constructed for the magazine: a female identity which includes an interest in fashion, beauty, etc. Within the scope of this identity, to which the representatives of the magazine as well as the readers belong (according to the set-up), the personal pronouns are used to refer to varying sub-communities. The examples are all followed by photos of products with indications of the specific brand and price, and the rhetoric is supposed to have an advertising function for these products, too.

(9) is the magazine’s introduction to a personal narrative from a woman who is not otherwise affiliated with the magazine. The narrative concerns experiences with her father-in-law:

- (9) Mother-in-law, my, we know her! She looks in a criticizing manner at the laundry and the fluff in the corners. She shakes her head in lack of understanding when she notices that we do not adore her son unconditionally (...) This broad generalisation may be unfair, but if you do not have such a stereotype for a mother-in-law yourself, you may know a woman who has to put up with one, or perhaps you have seen her incarnated in the worst form by Jane Fonda in “Monster-in-law”, or you may remember Charlotte’s mother-in-law in “Sex and the City”? (8, 23)

The entire example is built on the construction of a mother-in-law with some very specific properties. The objective of the introduction seems to be to put the reader in a certain mood, ready to read

the narrative (although this is about a father-in-law), and it is therefore important that the reader recognizes the feeling that the text tries to evoke. This feeling will only be evoked if the reader accepts the idea of this mother-in-law-category. The stereotypical history concerns the relationship between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law, and the two *wes* seem to include the whole female category and is as such inclusive, as the reader is supposed to be a woman. The example constructs a community between women in general. Anticipating an objection to the generalization, as there might be women who have not experienced the phenomenon, a variant is provided in which the reader, addressed by the singular second-person pronoun, is positioned as belonging to a group who does not have a personal experience but know another woman with the experience. Even a third possibility is offered: if this is not the case either, the last possibility is that the reader knows this mother-in-law-category from a movie or TV series. In this way, the magazine takes all precautions, leaving the impression that this mother-in-law-category exists for sure.

The last three examples are parts of the same article written by a (female) journalist on *ALT for damerne*. The first part of the article, to which the three examples belong, is an introductory text to an inquiry among the readers of *ALT for damerne*.

(10) HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR HUSBAND? (...)

We have asked our [you] readers what they [you] think men request from [us] women. (9, 27)

(11) Research shows that the brains of the two sexes develop in different ways and that we use the centers of the brains in completely different ways. So, yes, men are, in many ways, inhabitants of Mars, of the red planet. But, have [we] women actually solved the Gordian knot: men? Do we now know, after many years of practice, what men really want, what they request from [us] women? (9, 27)

(12) Nevertheless, we hope that we can kill some of your myths and confirm some of your ideas of the man of your life or men in general. (9, 27)

The question in (10) is the headline of the article, and the other part of the example forms part of the lead paragraph. In the beginning

of the example, *we* is exclusive and refers to the (representatives of) the magazine and is opposed to *you*, the readers. However, the second use of the plural first-person pronoun is inclusive and refers to women in general and as such to the representatives of the magazine as well as to the readers. In this example, the female category is marked directly by the noun *women* and is also directly opposed to the male category. It emerges from (10) that the inquiry is based on the assumption that women believe that men as a category want the same from women.

In (11) we see a distributional use of *we*, as it refers to both women and men, but as two different categories. Subsequently, this pronoun is used inclusively to refer to all members of the female category as opposed to the male category.

(12) is the conclusive text of the introductory text to the inquiry. In this example, the magazine returns to the boundary between themselves and the reader. *We* is again exclusive, and the function of the example seems to be to present themselves as the experts who offer a relevant inquiry to the readers.

Conclusion

Even in the description of *ALT for damerne* on its website an overall identity for its readers is constructed (or reproduced): a female identity which includes interest in fashion, beauty, etc. This constructed identity forms the basis for the content of the magazine and for the way in which the magazine addresses its readers. The application of this identity is related to the purpose of the magazine which is merely (or at least mainly) commercial, and is used as a strategy to maintain current buyers and get new buyers. Apparently “innocent” functional items, in this case the personal pronoun, contribute to construct an identity.

The analysis has shown that personal pronouns are used in *ALT for damerne* to create different groups and communities within the scope of the constructed female identity. These groups are sometimes the representatives of the magazine as opposed to the readers, and sometimes the entire female category itself, to which the representatives of the magazine as well as the readers belong. A huge discursive interpellation exists which takes a female community for granted. Though the pronoun *we*, which is used to refer to this category, appears to be of an ontological kind, it is ideologically based.

When the pronoun constructs different groups, the aim on several occasions seems to be to create a situation in which the expert women give advice to the non-expert women and invite them to be members of their groups. On the other hand, when the pronoun – typically in conjunction with the noun woman/women – refers to the female category as a whole, the aim seems to be to spur an interest in the reader by making her identify with the group to which she “naturally” belongs. The use of personal pronouns is generally employed as an intimacy strategy based on inclusion – even when the plural first-person pronoun has an exclusive meaning.

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Notes

- 1 This difference in reference is marked linguistically in several languages, but not in Danish or English. See for example Bennett (2002, 67) and Benveniste (1997, 170).
- 2 Some of the translated examples do not contain a personal pronoun in the English translation. In these cases, a personal pronoun in square brackets indicates that there is a personal pronoun in the original Danish example.
- 3 This example is taken from the Danish tabloid newspaper BT: <http://m.bt.dk/f/?article=21804486-Brevkassen-Hvordan-faar-jeg-fat-i-ham>
- 4 See Gustafsson, 2013 for more details on this phenomenon from a philosophical, a linguistic and a sociological perspective. For more details on personal pronouns in general, see Bennett (2002), Goddard (1995), Benveniste (1997), and Wodak (2006; 112)
- 5 <http://www.egmont-magasiner.dk/index.php?mod=-main&parent=86&id=57>.