**Social Deixis: Encoding Gender and Social Status with Pronouns in English**

Kenna Reagan

Montclair State University

Research has shown that pronouns are a useful tool in English to identify how people view themselves and others. In this study, we examine spoken American English to identify a correlation between pronoun usage, gender, and social status within a social hierarchy. The study finds that both gender and social status are encoded in pronouns in English on the basis of self-focus and other-focus.

**Keywords:** social hierarchy, pronouns, gender, social deixis

1. **Introduction**

Deixis can be defined as “the ways in which linguistic elements can refer to, or can only be interpreted by knowing, certain aspects of the communicative event in which those elements are used” (Levinson, 1983). A type of deixis that is often considered in languages beyond English, but only minimally in English itself is social deixis. This is the relationship between the speaker, the addressee, and a third party (Filmore, 1977).

Typically, social deixis is thought of in the way it is encoded in languages, such as Spanish and Korean with honorifics. When considering the Spanish *tú* and *usted*, *tu* is used to address someone in an informal way, while *usted* is used to address someone in a formal way. In English, we use certain titles, such as *Your Majesty* or *Ma’am* and *Sir* to encode things like social class and relationship. However, there is no clear use of pronouns to encode social relationships in English.

Deixis is a universal feature of language (Widlock, 2015) and in this study, we argue that pronouns are a feature in English that encodes valuable information about the participants in a speech event. For this study specifically, we aim to address how both gender and social status are encoded in English pronouns.

1. **Research on Pronoun Use, Gender, and Social Hierarchies**

This study took inspiration from previous analysis of pronoun usage in social hierarchies (Kacewicz, et al., 2013) and gender and social relations (Ridgeway, 2009). Kacewicz, et al. (2013) studied the use of pronouns within a social hierarchy to determine if there was a correlation between types of pronoun use and position within the hierarchy. They conducted five studies with face-to-face groups, task-oriented online conversations, informal face-to-face conversations, written language over email, and written letters within the Iraqi military. They concluded that there is a correlation between pronoun use and position within a social hierarchy. They saw an increased use of second person and first person plural pronouns among people of higher status within the social hierarchy and an increased use of first person singular pronouns among people of lower status within the social hierarchy. This is consistent with research that shows how people of higher status are more other-focused while people of lower status are more self-focused (Boucher, et al., 2008; Cassell, et al., 2006).

Ridgeway (2009) explains how gender acts as a “primary frame” in social relations by focusing on micro-interactional and institutional levels of social relations. These primary frames are used in interactions between individuals to define *self* and *other* in order to relate to the other individual. Primary frames are variables among people that are often used for cultural generalization. People use broad generalizations about members of a gender category to frame a conversation with an individual member of that category. This primary framing results in men having a modest advantage over women in contexts that are culturally perceived as masculine. Conversely, women have a very small advantage in contexts that are culturally perceived as feminine except in positions of authority. Institutionally, two factors affect the extent to which gender framing impacts the institution. The first is the relevance of gender in the situation. The second is how constraining organizational rules and procedures are on the institution. If the context is culturally gendered, gender framing will have more of an impact. Rules and procedures, however, have been shown to limit implicitly framing a situation by gender.

Research has shown that pronoun use is an example of how one’s definition of *self* and *other* can be reflected in the conversations they have with individuals around them (Kacewicz, et al., 2013). This study aims to highlight how gender frames interactions within a social hierarchy, as it is reflected by pronoun usage.

1. **Methodology**

**3.1 Approach**

The study will compare the use of pronouns within a social hierarchy, borrowing from Kacewicz, et al. What this study adds is the consideration of gender. There is a comparison between pronoun use of speakers, categorized as *male* and *female*, within a social hierarchy to determine if and how pronoun usage is reflective of the hierarchy.

**3.2 Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English**

The corpus used for this study is the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE). As the name suggests, the corpus consists of transcripts of recorded conversations in academic settings at the University of Michigan. The website includes options to narrow results according to role, setting, interactivity, etc. To narrow down the results and ensure interaction among participants, only highly interactive and moderately interactive transcripts were used for this study. After narrowing down the results of the search, xml files for each transcript were downloaded and converted into txt files. *Table 1* contains information on the corpus as a whole and the files selected for the study.

There are transcripts that represent different gender classifications at various positions within the social hierarchy. There is representation of men positioned relatively higher than women, women positioned relatively higher than men, and equal positioning within the hierarchy.

*Table 1. MICASE/Sub-corpus Size*

|  | Total number of files | Total number of words |
| --- | --- | --- |
| MICASE | 152 | 1,848,364 |
| Sub-corpus | 40 | 46,052 |

**3.3 Analytical Tools**

A Python script was written to avoid manually segmenting each file according to the speaker. The script created a dataframe for each file that includes columns for ‘ID’, ‘ROLE’, ‘SEX’, ‘utterances’, along with columns for word count, number of pronouns, and percentages of each type of pronoun use. The script then created dataframes to represent participants higher within their social hierarchy, participants lower within their social hierarchy, and participants of equal status within their social hierarchy. Each of these dataframes were then split according to gender to allow analysis of pronoun usage according to both gender and social status.

1. **Findings**

**4.1 Predictions**

Based on information from previous studies (Kacewicz, et al., 2013; Ridgeway, 2009) regarding gender and pronoun use in social hierarchies, we predict that there will be an increased use of first person singular pronouns among lower status individuals. Among higher status individuals, there will be an increased use of first person plural and second person pronouns. Among the lower status individuals, females will have a higher percentage of first person singular pronouns than males. Among the higher status individuals, males will have a higher percentage of first person plural and second person pronouns than females. Additionally, in the analysis of the groups consisting of members of equal status, we expect to see a higher percentage of first person singular pronouns among females and a higher percentage of first person plural and second person pronouns among males.

These predictions are in line with previous research that suggests pronouns reflect social hierarchies and that social hierarchies are generally male-dominated (Kacewicz, et al., 2013; Ridgeway, 2009; Acker, 1992).

**4.2 Results**

Using the process described above, the average percentages of each type of pronoun use (1st person singular, 1st person plural, and 2nd person) were calculated for each role and gender, as shown in *Table 2*. The findings are mostly consistent with the findings from Kacewicz, et al. (2013). Lower status individuals use a higher percentage of first person singular pronouns on average than higher status individuals. There doesn’t appear to be a correlation between status and the use of first person plural pronouns, unlike the previous study. There, they saw and increased use of first person plural pronouns among higher status individuals, with the exception of one study (Kacewicz, et al., 2013).

Another notable difference is the greater difference in second person pronouns. In the Kacewicz, et al. (2013) study, they only saw a marginally greater use of second person pronouns among higher status individuals. Here, there is a noticeably higher average percentage of second person pronoun use among higher status individuals.

Among equal status individuals, both males and females use a higher percentage of first person singular pronouns. However, there doesn’t appear to be a noticeable pattern with first person plural and second person pronouns.

*Table 2. Gender/Status and Average Percentage of Pronoun Use*

|  | 1st Person Singular | 1st Person Plural | 2nd Person |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Higher Status Female | 31.41 | 10.42 | 42.42 |
| Higher Status Male | 30.48 | 10.57 | 46.31 |
| Lower Status Female | 44.75 | 11.27 | 26.05 |
| Lower Status Male | 45.42 | 9.10 | 28.83 |
| Equal Status Female | 34.91 | 16.62 | 30.88 |
| Equal Status Male | 40.72 | 24.84 | 23.21 |

After the average percentages of each type of pronoun usage was calculated, the differences between genders and roles were calculated. Each row of *Table 3* shows the average percentage of one role and gender subtracted by another role and gender. For example, the first row shows the values of higher status females subtracted by higher status males.

As predicted, higher status females, on average, used a higher percentage of first person singular pronouns and a lower percentage of first person plural and second person pronouns than higher status males. However, the differences aren’t significant with first person singular and first person plural both being less than 1% different than their male counterparts. The difference in percentage of second person pronouns is only marginally higher by 3.89%.

Unlike the higher status males and females, the results of the lower status males and females didn’t align with the predictions. It was expected that females would use a higher percentage of first person singular pronouns, but on average, they used less than males. It was also expected that females would use a lower percentage of first person plural pronouns and second person pronouns than males. *Table 3* shows that while females did use a lower percentage (2.87% lower) of second person pronouns than males, they used a higher percentage (2.17% higher) of first person singular pronouns than males.

It is expected that among equal status individuals, females would use a higher percentage of first person singular pronouns and males would use a higher percentage of first person plural and second person pronouns. *Table 3* shows results that are inconsistent with the prediction. Females used a higher percentage of second person pronouns and lower percentage of both first person singular and plural pronouns. The differences in average percentages are more significant than other results discussed so far. It should be noted that the sampling of data is very small, consisting of only four transcripts. This may not be enough to form accurate conclusions on this subset of data.

*Table 3. Average Percent Differences*

|  | 1st Person Singular | 1st Person Plural | 2nd Person |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Higher Status Female - Higher Status Male | 0.93 | -0.15 | -3.89 |
| Higher Status Female - Lower Status Female | -13.34 | -0.85 | 16.37 |
| Higher Status Female - Lower Status Male | -14.01 | 1.32 | 13.59 |
| Higher Status Male - Lower Status Female | -14.27 | -0.70 | 20.26 |
| Higher Status Male - Lower Status Male | -14.94 | 1.47 | 17.48 |
| Lower Status Female - Lower Status Male | -0.67 | 2.17 | -2.87 |
| Equal Status Female - Equal Status Male | -5.81 | -8.22 | 7.78 |

The remaining four groups in *Table 3* will be compared to each other to see if there is a consistent pattern among males and females of different statuses. Across the board, the prediction is that those of higher status would use a higher percentage of first person plural and second person pronouns, while those of lower status would use a higher percentage of first person singular pronouns. Higher status females/lower status males, as well as higher status males/lower status males are aligned with this prediction. However, higher status males/lower status females and higher status females/lower status females are inconsistent with the prediction.

When comparing higher status females/lower status males and higher status females/lower status females, the average percentage difference of first person singular pronouns is smaller than it is among the other three groups. The average percentage difference of first person singular pronouns between higher status females and lower status males is smaller than both higher status males/lower status males and higher status males/lower status females. The largest gap in average percentage difference of first person singular pronouns among these groups is between higher status males and lower status males.

There is a wider gap in second person pronouns between higher status females and lower status females than there is between higher status females and lower status males. There is also a wider gap in second person pronouns between higher status males and lower status females than there is between all other groups.

The smallest gap in first person plural pronoun use is between higher status males and lower status females, with lower status females using a higher percentage of the second person pronouns. The largest gap is between higher status males and lower status males, with higher status males using a higher percentage of second person pronouns.

1. **Conclusions**

**5.1 Results Analysis**

Unlike Kacewicz, et al., this study found no significant correlation between first person plural pronouns and status. There also seemed to be no significant correlation between first person plural pronouns and gender as well. In fact, first person plural pronouns were the least used pronouns across all groups except equal status males, where it has already been established that there wasn’t enough data to confidently come to a conclusion about the results.

Otherwise, the results remained consistent with Kacewicz, et al. For the higher status groups, there was a significantly higher percentage of second person pronouns. Among the lower status groups, there was a significantly higher percentage of first person singular pronouns.

In terms of the role gender could play in pronoun usage and social status, males used more second person pronouns than females in both the higher and lower status groups. However, while higher status females used a higher percentage of first person singular pronouns than higher status males, lower status males used a higher percentage of first person singular pronouns than lower status females.

Overall, it seems that first person singular pronouns and second person pronouns are strong indicators of social status, with higher status individuals using a higher percentage of second person pronouns and lower status individuals using a higher percentage of first person singular pronouns. It also seems that males consistently use a higher percentage of second person pronouns. This indicates that higher status males are generally more other-focused than higher status females, a trait that is generally found among higher status individuals. This is also reflected in *Table 2* as we examine the differences in average percentages. The difference in second person pronouns between higher status females and lower status males is significantly smaller than that of higher status males and lower status females. The difference between higher status males and lower status males and higher status females and lower status females falls somewhere in the middle of the two. This could indicate that generally, lower status males tend to be more other-focused when interacting with higher status females than when interacting with higher status males. This could also indicate that lower status females tend to be more self-focused when dealing with higher status males than when dealing with higher status females.

Pronouns in English are a form of relational social deixis, where both social status and gender can be encoded. In the context of social hierarchies, first person singular pronouns encode a definition of self as lower in social status and a definition of other as higher in social status. Meanwhile, second person pronouns encode a definition of self as higher in social status and a definition of other as lower in social status. In addition, first person singular pronouns encode a higher degree of self-focus and second person pronouns encode a higher degree of other-focus. In this study, we find that males tend to be more other focused than females, while females tend to be more self-focused than males. This could mean that, on the basis of focus, pronouns could encode gender as well as social status.

**5.2 Limitations**

This corpus is outdated, as it was compiled in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. It would be more beneficial to work with a more recent corpus. This could address any social changes that have occurred regarding gender specifically. One notable area the corpus lacks is gender identification. In this corpus, participants were tagged as either ‘M’ for male or ‘F’ for female. These labels allow no room for consideration of the fact that gender exists on a spectrum and participants may not identify as male or female. Moving forward, a more comprehensive system for identification would be essential for accurate identification of the participants.

In addition, the study would include a more in depth look at individual interactions. This study paints a broad picture of how males and females use pronouns in general, but it doesn’t make any kind of distinction based on whether, for example, the males of lower status were interacting with males or females of higher status. However, this was beyond the scope of this study, given the time.

**5.3 Further Research**

Looking ahead, it would be interesting to do further research into how other primary frames, such as race and class, could be encoded in pronouns in English. It would then be interesting to look into how intentionally altering one’s pronoun use could affect their perception of themself in a hierarchical setting. If it can be proven that intentionally choosing to use more second person pronouns gives someone a greater sense of “power”, the technique could be used to increase one’s sense of confidence and how they are perceived by others. Conversely, could a person in a position of higher status change their pronoun use to seem more relatable to others who are of lower status in their social setting? If this is the case, what are the implications for pronouns used as referents for social deixis?

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