The semantic (un)markedness of pronominal features

It is a well-known property of pronouns that some pronouns get a more specific reading than others. The feminine possessive her for instance can only refer to feminine antecedents, whereas its masculine counterpart can refer to both masculine and feminine entities. Sentence (1), with the distributive reading, can only be felicitously uttered if all coat-takers are feminine, where as this restriction is absent in (2).

In Dutch, we find a similar phenomenon in the case of pronouns ik (‘I’) and je (‘you’). Although the pronoun ik can only refer to the speaker (3), it is not the case that je only refers to the addressee. A recent development in Dutch is that je can also refer to the speaker (4), albeit with a different usage. Uttering a sentence like (4) brings in a strong implicature that the hearer would have done the same thing.

In this paper we provide a unified explanation for both phenomena in terms of feature geometry as proposed by Harley & Ritter’s (2002), but we argue that some pronominal relations that have been traditionally analysed as instances of sisterhood within a feature hierarchy actually denote dominance relations, similar to the way the singular-plural distinction is accounted for in Sauerland et al (2005). Take Harley & Ritter’s (2002) pronominal feature hierarchy (5). Under this system her would be assigned the features [Ref. Expr], [Ind], [Class], [Animate] and [Fem] and his [Ref. Expr], [Ind], [Class], [Animate] and [Masc] (a.o.). Instead we argue that although the feature classification for her is correct, his actually lacks a feature [Masc]. [Animate] is his’ most specific feature. From these feature specifications the semantic differences immediately follow. As her carries [Fem] and is bound by gender-neutral everybody, everybody can denote only feminine individuals. However, as his is does not carry any gender feature, nothing prevents everybody from also referring to female individuals.

The question then is why in other contexts his does receive a (strong or weak) masculine interpretation. In some cases this is anaphorically or contextually determined. In (6) the antecedent John is male, hence the masculine reading of his. In (7) a hearer normally understands the utterance as masculine, since hats for men and women are usually different. Thus the hearer infers that the speaker is able to distinguish the sex of the hat owner. This also applies to the minimal pair in (8) where both possessive pronouns are understood to be equally strong. In the case of her, this is due to the feature [FEM] it consists of; in the case of his the strong masculine interpretation follows from the fact that the hearer will safely assume that the speaker knows the gender if his partner, and is maximally informative. By not using her, it is strongly inferred that the partner is male. It should be noted though that the masculine inference of his can indeed be cancelled (for instance by a policeman who on his first working day finds out that his partner-to-be cannot make it because he has just sold his motorcycle). This cancellation does not apply is his were replaced by her.

The Dutch phenomenon, illustrated in (4), is accounted for along similar lines. Dutch ik carries not only a feature [Participant], but also a feature [Speaker]. Dutch je however carries a feature [Participant] as well, but lacks a feature [Addressee]. As such, it can refer to both the speaker and the addressee. It follows again pragmatically that je refers to the addressee, since a speaker is always fully informative about his own actions (except for a few uncommon exceptions like memory gaps, etc.). Hence, if the speaker chooses not to use ik but je, it means the speaker implies that the pronoun does not refer to himself, and thus by implicature to the addressee.

Although the above may explain why ik refers to the speaker and je to the addressee, the question remains open why je in (4) may also refer to the speaker. Why didn’t the speaker use ik instead? Again this follows from the featural make-up of je. The semantics of (4) is that a participant of the conversation called the brigade. Given that the speaker may take the hearer to be self aware of his past actions, and that the speaker may safely assume that the hearer will take the speaker to have the same self awareness, it follows that if the speaker knows that in a situation where the speaker called the brigade and the hearer did not, je can only receive a 1st person interpretation. However, then the question rises why the speaker would not have used the more informative ik instead of je? The reason for this is that the 1st person interpretation of ik cannot be cancelled, but the 1st person inference of (4) can. If it were not the speaker who called the brigade, the sentence can still be true, but only if the hearer would have called the brigade. In other words, the usage of je instead of the more informative ik, brings in a modal effect that the hearer would have done the exact same thing in
that situation. This is exactly the modal effect that is generally attested with sentences like (4). Note again that this pragmatic analysis is furthermore supported by the fact that this implicature can easily be cancelled, as shown in (9).

This usage of speaker-referring je in Dutch is relatively new and despite its highly frequent usage (cf. Weerman 2006) not accepted by all speakers of Dutch. In older versions of the language such usage was ruled out (cf. Aalberse 2003) and je could only refer to the addressee. This semantic change thus follows from a new feature assignment: Dutch je lost its [Addressee] feature during the last decades of the previous century.

To conclude, we argue that the marked status of feminine pronouns w.r.t. their masculine counterparts is explained by their asymmetric feature distribution and that the same applies with Dutch pronouns ik and je.

**Data and figures:**

(1) Everybody, got her, coat
(2) Everybody, got his, coat
(3) Er was brand en ik belde de brandweer Dutch
    ‘There was fire and I called the brigade’
(4) Er was brand en je belde de brandweer Dutch
    ‘There was fire and you called the brigade’
    ‘There was fire and I called the brigade’
(5) Harley & Ritter’s pronominal feature hierarchy (Harley & Ritter 2002: 486):

(6) John, took his, coat
(7) Who, has left his, hat?
(8) My, partner has sold his, motorcycle
(9) Er was brand en je belde de brandweer. Dat zou jij nooit gedaan hebben. Dutch
    ‘There was fire and you called the brigade. That would you never done have
    ‘There was fire and I called the brigade. YOU would never have done that’

**References:**


