

Urbanová, Ludmila

Impersonality

In: Urbanová, Ludmila. *On expressing meaning in English conversation : semantic indeterminacy*. Vyd. 1. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2003, pp. 49-57

ISBN 8021032529

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/123331>

Access Date: 05. 12. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

5. IMPERSONALITY

5.1 Impersonality as an Expression of Semantic Indeterminacy

Impersonality is related to **tenor**, i.e. relationship between the participants in conversation. It is understood as an intentional expression of illocutionary opacity (obscurity of meaning) with regard to speaker/hearer identity at the level of interaction.

Impersonality is linked with other patterns of semantic indeterminacy, namely **indirectness**, **attenuation** and **accentuation**. All these features are characteristic of “genuine indeterminacy in the semantic structure of natural languages” (Lyons 1995.149) inherently present in the language system. They increase the meaning potential of language and trigger shifts in the interpretation of **word and utterance meaning in context**.

My attempt at a systematic analysis of pragmatic values related to the concept of semantic indeterminacy draws on Halliday’s understanding of the concept of discourse grammar: “...a discourse grammar has to be functional and semantic in its orientation, with the grammatical categories explained as the realization of semantic patterns. Otherwise it will face inwards rather than outwards, characterizing the text in explicit formal terms but providing no basis on which to relate it to the non-linguistic universe of its situational and cultural environment” (1994.xvii).

Another source to which the present study is related is Schiffrin (1997.75), who makes a plea that discourse analysis “should not imply a field that is void of theory”. In this connection, Hopper’s concept of **emergent grammar** is highly relevant: “Discourse-functional grammarians view discourse... not only as the place where grammar is manifested in use, but also as the source from which grammar is formed or ‘emerges’” (Cumming and Ono 1997.112).

5.2 Pragmatic Categories of Involvement and Detachment

Chafe (1982.45) touches upon the difference between informal spoken language and formal written language and summarizes the relationship in the following words: “I will speak of ‘involvement’ with the audience as typical for a speaker, and ‘detachment’ from the audience as typical for a writer”.

Involvement is understood by Chafe as “a speaker’s more frequent reference to him—or herself” (1982.46). **Detachment**, on the other hand, is connected with the suppression of direct involvement and is achieved by such means as the passive voice and nominalization, which reflect “abstract reification” (1982.46).

The distinction on which involvement vs. detachment operate is the dichotomy **foreground versus background information**. In cases of involvement, the interactional process comes to the fore, whereas via detachment it is substantially subdued.

Chafe (1982.48) claims that “whereas written language fosters the kind of detachment evidenced in the use of passives and nominalizations, spoken language shows a variety of manifestations of the involvement which a speaker has with his or her audience. Among these evidences of involvement are references to the speaker, references to the speaker’s mental processes, devices for monitoring the flow of information, the use of emphatic particles, fuzziness, and the use of direct quotes”.

I express the view that detachment, reservation and depersonalization are elements which appear also in face-to-face conversation (Urbanová 1996.67-68). The occurrence of these features in authentic face-to-face conversation is justified by the need for mitigation when the speaker does not want to make “out-right assertions” (Coates 1987.122) and show his/her commitment in public. The basic needs of communication such as politeness, self-defence and self-protection are satisfied by the use of these devices.

It cannot be said that “speakers interact with their audiences, writers do not” (Chafe 1982.45). Chafe is aware of this discrepancy when he makes the observation: “I should repeat that these seemingly categorical statements about spoken and written language apply to extremes on a continuum. ... There are other styles of speaking which are more in the direction of writing, and other styles of writing which are more like speech” (1982.48). Detachment “evidenced in the use of passives and nominalizations” (Chafe 1982.48) is noticeable as part of **institutionalized spoken language**. In interviews the participants are expected to meet socio-cultural requirements.

In this study I will try to shed some light on the language of interviews and examine the degree of detachment. I will present the current structural and semantic patterns used in interviews and explain the interface between syntax and semantics in this genre.

5.3 Involvement v. Detachment in Different Conversation Genres

The speaker–hearer relationship in authentic spontaneous face-to-face conversation is usually foregrounded, making the degree of social mutuality very high.

Example 39:

yeah I suppose if you got experience in American university administration you could still come back here (S.1.5.1109-1111)

Certain conversation genres display a high degree of involvement, reflecting personal views and attitudes of the speaker rather than facts.

Example 40:

but you enjoyed it first of all (S.1.5.1283-1284)

oh yes I enjoyed it very much in fact (S.1.5.1285-1286)

The *I - you* exchange of views, devoid of generalizations, is typical of face-to-face conversation. Traces of detachment and depersonalization can, however, be found as well.

Example 41:

or one wonders whether it's that way round or whether it's the other way round (S.1.3.1175-1176)

On the other hand, the type of discourse classified as an interview is much more impersonal.

Schiffrin (1994.146) characterizes the function of interviews as “information-gaining”. From the pragmatic point of view, interviews reflect “a desire to resolve an asymmetrical distribution of information” (1994.160) based on an asymmetrical power distribution. The basic pattern used in interviews is thus the typical question-answer schema. Depending on the topic, however, some parts of interviews are more “chatty” than others.

Impersonality arises when the roles of the speaker and the addressee are **backgrounded**, being closely connected with **the shift towards formality**. In radio interviews this shift occurs very frequently, since there is no close personal link between the interviewer and the interviewee, or, in a different situation, there is a tendency to suppress this link. Neither is there any familiarity between the speakers on the radio and the potential listeners to the radio broadcast. At the same time the subject-matter in this type of exchange is much more sophisticated than that of everyday face-to-face conversation. The relevance of the subject matter for a different degree of involvement vs. detachment is mentioned by Chafe: “...such use is in part determined by the subject matter...” (1982.46).

Pragmatically speaking, there is an atmosphere of distance, i.e. a lack of familiarity and intimacy, typical of radio interviews. There is, however, a tendency to overcome the gap between the speaker(s) and the addressee by using semi-personal and depersonalized ways of expression rather than impersonal ones. Leech (1982.150) claims in this respect: “Because neither the role of the speaker nor that of addressee is prominent in news broadcasts, we would expect the language to reflect impersonality. However, there is an attempt...to reduce the impersonality (and formality) of the situation by the use of the personal pronoun *us*...”

The possibilities ranging from informal to formal with regard to pronominal use and syntactic structure are demonstrated on the chart below:

Chart 4: Personal vs. Impersonal Features in Interviews

I – you – you (anybody) > we – they > one – people > passive voice, there is

Leech and Svartvik (1980.57) label *one, you, they* **indefinite generic pronouns**: “One (singular) is a rather <formal and impersonal> pronoun, meaning ‘people in general, including you and me’. You is its <informal> equivalent”.

Concerning *they*, Leech and Svartvik (1980.57) comment on its use: “They can also be used indefinitely in <informal> English, but with a different meaning from one and you. It means roughly ‘people (excluding you and me)’”.

In the classification of interpersonal relations represented in conversation behaviour, I distinguish between:

- (1) **informal (personal) manner of presentation**, i.e. the *I – you* exchange;
- (2) **semi-personal manner of presentation**, i.e. the generalized use of *you* meaning anybody, institutionalized *we* and *they* and the pro-form *people*;
- (3) **formal (depersonalized) manner of presentation**, i.e. the use of *one*;
- (4) **formal (impersonal) manner of presentation**, i.e. the use of the passive voice and the *there is* construction.

The distinction between face-to-face conversation on the one hand and the interview on the other is based on the assumption that in radio interviews the shift towards indeterminacy is clearly manifested. The expression of thoughts is markedly depersonalized and even impersonal, i.e. **indeterminate with regard to the speaker’s identity**. The speaker’s meaning withdraws in the process of communication, due to a marked distance which is reflected in such pragmatic features as **formality, generalization and self-protection**.

The speaker’s meaning is blurred by the use of depersonalized and semi-personal deictics such as *one, people, they*. A further step towards impersonality is materialized by means of the passive voice and existential predication. The frequent occurrence of ways of expression other than personal is justified by the effort of the speaker to use “institutionalized” speech acts reflecting institutional and social bindings (Mey, Mathesius workshop Prague 1997).

The above hypothesis has been verified in interviews from the complete version of the London-Lund Corpus, namely S.6.1, S.6.3 and S.6.7.

S.6.1a (tone units 1-537) is a text produced by two interlocutors.

a = a female broadcaster, aged c.25

b = a female academic, aged c.25

S.6.1b (tone units 538-771) is produced by the same speakers as in S.6.1 a.

S.6.1c (tone units 772-1281) is a text produced by two interlocutors:

a = the same speaker as in the previous two sections b = male academic, aged c. 40

Abbreviations used to indicate grammatical means: NC = nominal clause, PV = passive voice, EP = existential predication, IP = indefinite pronoun

Table 3: Indeterminacy of Speaker/Hearer Identity

Text	we	IP people	IP one	PV	Total
S.6.1 a,b,c	75	5	16	27	123

Example 42:**Semi-personal manner of presentation**

which is the second lot of--really basic tools that we're going to give our people (S.6.1.2)

we would hope that our students would have a full understanding of [dhi] cultural differences (S.6.1.586-588)

we advise people on what decisions to take (S.6.1.835-836)

people are working on the quantification of marketing problems (S.6.1.517-520)

there are also people working in the marketing field (S.6.1.675-676)

Depersonalized manner of presentation

one has to have quite a strong background in mathematics and statistics (S.6.1.55-58)

certainly in Eastern Europe one has a different impression of the work that's going on (S.6.1.805-807)

one will have a very accurate answer (S.6.1.1231)

Impersonal manner of presentation

a great deal of work has been done (S.6.1.157)

perhaps this kind of activity is more appropriately undertaken by technical colleges (S.6.1.756-758)

it was called operational research (S.6.1.1161)

Blending the semi-personal and impersonal manner of presentation moderates the distance between the speaker and the addressee, showing speaker's involvement.

Example 43:

what we don't know is just how much notice is taken of people in Eastern Europe (S.6.1.849-851)

we operate what might be described as a gigantic tutorial system (S.6.1.909-910)

so we collect data which will be generated (S.6.1.1165-1166)

Text S.6.3 is a radio interview with a politician (aged c. 60) and the interviewer (a male broadcaster, aged c. 43). The interview is delivered in a formal

style which results in the abundance of passive voice constructions, while other means reflecting impersonality are minimal.

Table 4: Indeterminacy of Speaker/Hearer Identity

Text	we	IP people	PV	EP	Total
S.6.3	77	11	56	2	146

Impersonality appears even in questions raised by the interviewer.

Example 44:

isn't that an admission in a way that British policy the policy of both major parties towards Northern Ireland in recent years has in fact been founded on an illusion (S.6.3.309-314)

I imagine that your view of the economic needs of the country is rather more fully articulated than that (S.6.3.462-464)

In the examples the obvious reason for the use of impersonality phenomena is the need for **self-protection**, a strategy which avoids a clash of opinions. The impersonal manner of presentation is combined with the semi-personal indefinite pronoun *we*, which is frequently used as well. The co-occurrence of the pronoun and the passive voice levels out the manner of presentation.

Example 45:

we were elected in circumstances which we haven't known in this political generation (S.6.3.28-30)

we were pledged to stop [dhi] housing finance act requirement about forcing up rents (S.6.3.151-152)

I think it's shown great courage I am a little appalled (S.6.3.684-685)

Text S.6.7 is a radio interview with an elder statesman" (speaker b); speaker a is an interviewer. The results show the prevalence of passive voice constructions. The passive voice dominates other semi-personal and impersonal devices, amounting to one half of the total number of occurrences.

Table 5: Indeterminacy of Speaker/Hearer Identity

Text	NC	PV	EP	IP people	IP one	Total
S.6.7	11	20	4	3	2	40

The syntactic structure of impersonal utterances varies and displays a range of semantic nuances with regard to speaker–hearer interaction.

The **nominal clause** renders the message in an evaluative, but rather impersonal way. Constructions which have been identified in this function show detachment, such as

the thing was, that wasn't the view, the view I took, it was clear, the argument was, if that meets the demand, the strains that have come on the economy, so much was that true, that was true, that was a wonderful gesture, it's a great illusion to think.

Example 46:

it's a great illusion to think that [dhi] Swedish people wished to ... made a traditional kingdom for the purpose of ruling other people (S.6.7.9640-9650)

The semantic difference between *it's a great illusion to think* and *I don't think* lies in the difference between personal detachment versus involvement, an implication of reservation, disagreement and negative evaluation and a straightforward expression of a negative standpoint. At the same time there is a difference in the degree of abstraction, since the expression *it's a great illusion to think* is much more abstract.

The **passive voice** is a frequent means of conveying an impersonal message. Compared with the use of the nominal clause, the passive construction sounds more formal; in certain contexts its content becomes backgrounded, less important or even marginal with regard to the rest of the message.

Example 47:

once the act of nineteen thirty seven was passed Mercia and Wessex became independent (S.6.7.9520-9530)

because our world was curiously restricted it's only in war you mix with all the chaps all the fellows go through these things (S.6.7.10610-10650)

In other contexts, however, the use of the passive voice underscores the negative result and sounds ominous.

Example 48:

this has been the problem all through if it were ultimately merged (S.6.7.2160-2180)

well now it's done (S.6.7.4170)

because I was wounded and all the rest of it but I was three times wounded (S.6.7.10570-10580)

Existential predication is less frequent than the above-mentioned syntactic structures reflecting impersonality. Pragmatically, however, it is a powerful means of expressing detachment and distance between the speaker and the hearer. This structure is mentioned by Schiffrin as "semantically weak inform-

ation in sentence initial position". Schiffrin argues that "...we cannot understand a particular speech act (e.g. a question) if we do not know anything about either the speech event (e.g. question/answer exchange) or speech situation (e.g. an interview) in which it occurred" (1997:77).

Example 49:

but it wasn't sent there was a compromise (S.6.7.1040-1050)

The **rheme** is placed as a final element in the clause, and it is also the agentless construction which weakens the process of interaction and stresses its result. Compared with the structure *we have reached a compromise* the structure *there was a compromise* is pragmatically utilizable in situations in which the role of the participants is backgrounded, either deliberately, or because it is not relevant in the given situation.

Indefinite pronouns *people, one* are not very frequent in text S.6.7. The role of indefinite pronouns is that of **generalization**, or an intentional **lack of specification**.

Example 50:

and the whole of the people who were the clients (S.6.7.4280)

yes and one wonders whether this curious drama wasn't being replayed in
(S.6.7.9010)

A merger of a variety of means expressing impersonality reinforces the effect of distance and detachment.

Example 51:

if that meets the demand for the new capital expenditure then there will be a balance there won't be inflation if it's going to be met by printing money then there will be an inflation (S.6.7.1490-1540)

5.4 Semantic and Pragmatic Aspects of Impersonality in Spoken Discourse

The occurrence of impersonality in the analysed texts can be generalized as follows:

(1) **indeterminacy of speaker/hearer identity** is a typical feature of speaker-hearer interaction in interviews; the frequency of occurrence of impersonal means, mainly passive voice constructions, depersonalized one and semi-personal indefinite pronouns such as *we, they* and *people* is very high;

(2) **nominal clauses expressing detachment, reservation and distance** are used instead of verbal expressions showing personal involvement, e.g. *the argument was, the view I took, if that meets the demand* etc.;

(3) **balance between impersonal and personal ways of expression** is reached via a combination of means, which contributes to the lively flow of communication in interviews, e.g. *we were elected which we haven't known in this political generation*;

(4) **reinforcement of the effect of impersonality** is reflected in the **accumulation of impersonal means**, e.g. *but it wasn't sent there was a compromise*.

All these features have a direct bearing on the meaning potential of utterances in spoken communication. Through the interplay of a variety of means in the proper context, shifts of meaning in speaker–hearer interaction can be achieved.

Semantic indeterminacy is a phenomenon which is desirable, although it is “costly and risky” (Dascal 1983). It is desirable because it enables the speaker to render his/her message from various points of view, modifying the illocutionary force and allowing for choices and alternations in speaker attitude. It is costly in the sense that the hearer has to labour hard to arrive at an interpretation which would be similar or identical to speaker meaning. It is risky since the interpretation of the speaker’s message may go wrong and prove inadequate.

Impersonality is a common feature of institutional language in which **the need for generalization** (emphasizing a global, a more matter-of-fact view of reality), together with **politeness phenomena** (avoidance of a conflict, self-protection and self-defence) plays a significant pragmatic role.