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## IMPERSONALITY IN RADIO INTERVIEWS AS A MANIFESTATION OF SEMANTIC INDETERMINACY

### 1. Impersonality as a Manifestation of Semantic Indeterminacy

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, accentuation and vagueness**. 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**.<sup>1</sup>

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, Introduction 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 here: "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).

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<sup>1</sup> This study is part of my dissertation *Semantic Indeterminacy in Authentic English Conversation* submitted for defence at the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University Brno 1998. The aim of the monograph to be published is to find a common denominator of the manifestations of semantic indeterminacy at the level of utterances 'quoted in their proper context' (Mey, 1993.184).

## 1. 1 Pragmatic Categories of Involvement v. 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 v. detachment operate is the dichotomy **foreground v. 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'.

In Urbanová (1996.67–8) I have expressed the view that detachment, reservation and depersonalization are elements which appear also in face-to-face conversation (the samples are taken from the London–Lund Corpus). 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 'outright 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 clearly noticeable and is part of **institutionalized spoken language**. In interviews roles of participants are expected to meet sociocultural 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 conversation genre.

## 1. 2 Involvement v. Detachment in Different Conversation Genres

In authentic spontaneous face-to-face conversation the speaker-hearer relationship is usually foregrounded and the degree of social mutuality is very high.

**Example 1:** *yeah I suppose if you got experience in American university administration you could still come back here* (S.1.5 1109–11)

Certain genres of conversation display a high degree of involvement since they primarily reflect personal views and attitudes of the speaker.

**Example 2:** *but you enjoyed it first of all* (S.1.5 1283–4)  
*oh yes I enjoyed it very much in fact* (S.1.5 1285–6)

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 3:** *or one wonders whether it's that way round or whether it's the other way round* (S.1.3 1175–6)

On the other hand, the type of discourse labelled an interview is much more impersonal in character.

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 relaxed and ‘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 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 v. detachment is mentioned by Chafe: ‘Although 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 slightly depersonalized ways of expression rather than the 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:

**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 my classification of interpersonal relations as represented in conversation behaviour distinction is made between:

- (1) **informal (personal) manner of presentation**, i.e. the exchange between *I* and *you*
- (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

My hypothesis concerning 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 a shift towards indeterminacy becomes very clearly manifested. The manner of presentation tends to be depersonalized and even impersonal, i.e. **indeterminate with regard to the speaker's identity**. The speaker's meaning becomes subdued 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).

## 2.0. Results of the Investigation

The working hypothesis expressed above has been verified in three texts classified as interviews from the complete version of the London-Lund Corpus, namely S.6.1, S.6.3 and S.6.7.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to a most productive cooperation with the Department of English at Lund University in Sweden the three unpublished texts have been made available for analysis. The informa-

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

S.6.1 c (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

**Table I: Indeterminacy of Speaker/Hearer Identity**

S.6.1 a, b, c	<i>we</i>	<i>people</i>	<i>one</i>	passive voice	total
	75	5	16	27	123

**Example 4:**

**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.6.1 586–8)*

*we advise people on what decisions to take (S.6.1 835–6)*

*people are working on the quantification of marketing problems (S.6.1 517–20)*

*there are also people working in the marketing field (S.6.1 675–6)*

**Depersonalized manner of presentation**

*one has to have quite a strong background in mathematics and statistics (S.6.1 55–8)*

*certainly in Eastern Europe one has a different impression of the work that's going on (S.6.1 805–7)*

*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.6.1 756–8)*

*it was called operational research (S.6.1 1161)*

Combination of both semi-personal and impersonal manner of presentation reduces the impression of distance, showing a great deal of involvement.

**Example 5:**

*what we don't know is just how much notice is taken of people in Eastern Europe (S.6.1 849–51)*

*we operate what might be described as a gigantic tutorial system (S.6.1 909–10)*

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tion on the text structure of the interviews was given to me by Bengt Altenberg.

*so we collect data which will be generated (S.6.1 1165–6)*

Text S.6.3 is a radio interview with Harold Wilson as Prime Minister (c. 60) and the interviewer (a male broadcaster c. 43). The interview is delivered in a very formal style which is reflected in a high proportion of passive voice constructions. Other means of expression reflecting impersonality are rare.

**Table II: Indeterminacy of Speaker/Hearer Identity**

S.6.3	<i>we</i>	<i>people</i>	passive voice	<i>there is</i>	total
	77	11	56	2	146

**Example 6:**

Impersonality appears even in questions raised by the interviewer:

*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.6.3 309–14)*

*I imagine that your view of the economic needs of the country is rather more fully articulated than that (S.6.3 462–4)*

In such instances the obvious reason for impersonality is the need for self-protection, a strategy which avoids a clash of opinions.

Apart from the impersonal manner of presentation, the semi-personal indefinite pronoun *we* is frequently used as well. The combination of a pronoun and passive voice creates a balance between the personal versus impersonal manner of presentation.

**Example 7:**

*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.6.3 151–2)*

*I think it's shown great courage I am a little appalled (S.6.3 684–5)*

Text S.6.7 is a radio interview with an 'elder statesman' (speaker b), speaker a is an interviewer.

**Table III: Indeterminacy of Speaker/Hearer Identity**

S.6.7	NC	PV	EP	IP <i>people</i>	IP <i>one</i>	total
	11	20	4	3	2	40

NC = nominal clause, PV = passive voice, EP = existential predication, IP = indefinite pronoun

## 2. 1. The syntactic structure of impersonal utterances

is varied and displays a range of semantic nuances with regard to speaker / hearer interaction.

**2. 1. 1. The nominal clause** renders the message in an evaluative but rather impersonal way. Constructions which have been identified in this function show detachment:

*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 8:

*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 9640–50)*

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.

**2. 1. 2. The passive voice** is a frequent means of rendering an impersonal message. Compared with the use of the nominal clause, the passive construction sounds more formal and in certain contexts its content becomes backgrounded, less important or even marginal with regard to the rest of the message.

### Example 9:

*once the act of nineteen thirty seven was passed Mercia and Wessex became independent (S.6.7 9520–30)*  
*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 10610–50)*

In other contexts, however, the use of the passive voice stresses the negative result of the action and sounds fatal.



**Example 10:**

*this has been the problem all through if it were ultimately merged (S.6.7 2160–80)*

*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 10570–80)*

**2. 1. 3. 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 information 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 11:**

*but it wasn't sent there was a compromise (S.6.7 1040–50)*

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 the text S.6.7.

The role of indefinite pronouns is that of generalization, or an intentional lack of specification.

**Examples 12:**

*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 13: (NC + EP + EP + PV + EP)**

*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)*

### 3. Conclusions

On the basis of the interviews S.6.1, S.6.3 and S.6.7 from the complete version of the London–Lund Corpus the total extent of which is 15,000 words, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- (1) **indeterminacy of speaker/hearer identity** is a typical feature of the 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 considerably influence the meaning potential of utterances in spoken communication. Through the interplay of a variety of means in the proper context shifts of meaning in the 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 different points of view, modifying the illocutionary force and allowing for choices and alternations in the speaker attitude.

It is costly in the sense that the hearer has to labour hard to arrive at the 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, thus a more objective view of the reality), together with politeness phenomena (avoidance of a conflict, self–protection and self–defence) plays a crucial role.

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