[En] gendering the 'I'

The First-Person Pronoun, Gender, and Context

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Abstract. The first-person pronoun *I* appears neuter in the English language but it generates certain semiotic and linguistic problems. One of them is its dual system of reference. In a conversation, the pronoun *I* stands for both the speaker or referee and a referent or the grammatical unit. In a wider context of Linguistics, Gender-studies, Literary criticism, Discourse analysis, and Conversation analysis the paper investigates the relation between the referent *I* and the referee *I* and argues that the gender of the speaker or referee *I* endows the referent *I* with a gendered signification.

Keywords: gender, language, pronoun, context

Introduction

John says, "I am a man". In the speech of John, *I* stands for two discourses: one for John and another for a set of characteristics that John claims to possess. This set of characteristics informs an essence, both biological and cultural, of gender. In the pronouncement of *I*, John represents (him) self linguistically. But this representation is not a simple semiotic message because in the instance of utterance John is doubly signified: first as a person, who is unique among other Johns, and second, as a gender, the masculine. The claim of John for his masculine gender also connects him further to a larger conversational setting or context in which John's claim is both expected and justified. The paper aims to attract scholarly attention to the larger semiotic and linguistic problems in such naïve statements as "I am a *man*". The paper contends that the semiotic and linguistic problems with the first-person singular pronoun, *I*, are further linked to gender. Gender is an extralinguistic category of signs that shapes the extent of reference. To understand the relation between gender and the pronoun *I*, the research consults a wide spectrum of theoretical analysis: Linguistics, Gender-studies, Literary criticism, Discourse analysis, and Conversation analysis. The paper first clarifies the doubly-folded reference-system in the use of pronoun *I* with the help of linguistics and then proceeds to analyze the linguistic phenomenon called the referent *I*. Then the nature of referent *I* is investigated in terms of the gender of the referee or speaker in context. The principal inquiry of the paper deals with the argument that there is a gendered tendency in the pronominal system of references in particular, the referent *I*, and the implicit role of the speaker to generate such a tendency.

The First-person Pronoun *I*: A Critique

A pronoun is a part of speech that acts as a substitute for a noun to avoid unnecessary repetition. The word, pronoun, is etymologically derived from Latin '*prōnōmen*' and Greek '*antōnumíā*'; and its etymology informs its function of substitution as a system of reference (Hoad, 2002, p. 373). The pronominal system of reference includes the first-person (*I),* the second-person (*you),* and the third-person (*he/she)* pronouns in regards to person in the singular case. But this well-established grammatical practice obscures certain semiotic and linguistic problems.

Emile Benveniste locates one fundamental semiotic problem in the practice of referring the person by different denominations of the first-second-third person pronouns in *Problems in General Linguistics* (1971). He finds that the first-person *I* and second-person *you* 'belong' to person while the third person *he* 'lacks' the material sign of person (p. 217). *I* and *you* differ from other pronominal class of reference because they are not 'fixed' to a 'definable' object in an identical fashion of nouns as signifiers to material objects or mental images (p. 218). Language resolves this problem, which arises from the separation between the indicator (of person) and the instance of utterance (*I* and *you),* by forming "an ensemble of empty signs that are nonreferentia with respect to reality" (p. 219). The first-person *I* is, therefore, an 'empty' sign and it does not refer to a material object because it is practically tied to a system of utterance which varies according to the speaker.

The producer of *I* relies on a background systematicity that emerges from the difference in referring expressions, for example, John and *I* (Gaynesford 11). But the fundamental difference is the one that exists between *I* and personal proper names (p. 19). *I* can only be used for an object of expression and it doesn't inform "certain facts about the context—e.g. who is speaking" (p. 20). This linguistic phenomenon of *I* functions contextually for another strange semiotic fact that *I* is defined in terms of locution, not in terms of objects (Benveniste, 1971, p. 218). As *I* does not need an object for its semiotic function, it provides no information about the context. But *I* can still perform its grammatical function as a substitute for the proper name. For example, when John says "I don't go to school" and Mark hears it without noticing who says so, Mark understands that somebody doesn't go to school and the grammatical unit *I* doesn't reveal any information about the speaker.

Although *I* doesn't contain information about the context of reference, its lexical value is valid only in its context. Benveniste reasons that in two consecutive utterances of *I* by the same speaker or producer, one of the utterances is considered a reported instance. For example, I say, "I always get up early in the morning". In this linguistic phenomenon, Benveniste identifies the problem of *I* as a "combined double instance" of discourse (*Problems* 218). The speaker *I* produces in an act of utterance another linguistic *I* which is different and unique in its semiotic role. The linguistic *I* is a referent to the referee or speaker of *I*. When the referent *I* is separated from the referee *I*, it ceases to exist. The referent *I* then becomes context-free but the referee *I* remains contextually bound because the referee *I* is indispensable of the context.

The referee or speaker is a culturally signified human being and language introduces the human subject to the semiotic universe by a proper noun. The most immediate pronoun that represents the proper noun by the highest degree of proximity is the first-person *I*. In an instance of discourse, *I* obfuscates the referee or the speaker in its linguistic act of context-free signification. Furthermore, *I* is anaphoric in its nature of signification, that is, *I* always refers back to the antecedent proper noun. This anaphoric nature of the first-person *I* encumbers the referent *I* with the gender of the referee. For example, in the reported speech where John says "I am a *nurse*" the feminine noun *nurse* can't determine the gender of referent *I* because it refers back to John, the masculine proper noun.

Language: A Gendered System of Signification

Gender is the primary mark or signification that categorizes nouns, adjectives, and pronouns in three genders: masculine, feminine, or neuter (Hoad, 2002, p. 191). Gender acts as an informant of the word. A native speaker works through a shared system of 'gender-assignment' to nouns by some basic information about the noun: its meaning (semantics) and its form (Corbett, 1991, pp. 7-8). These two basic classes of information form two types of gender systems in a language, semantic (based on meaning) and formal (morphological and phonological); in English there exists only the semantic one (Livia, 2001, p. 14). In the English language, gender is "reflected only in pronouns" and in third person cases only (Corbett, 1991, p. 169-170).

In English grammar the referent *I* acts neuter because the gender of the personal pronoun is overt and conspicuous only in the case of the third-person *He/She*. But the referent *I* is not grammatically neuter across all languages. The English equivalent of referent *I* in such languages as Japanese, Thai, and Arabic is highly dependent on social context as its use differs in accordance with dialect, formality, gender, and social class. In the Japanese language, men use *watakushi, watashi* for formal greeting and *boku* and *ore* for the informal ones; while women use *watakushi* for formal greeting and *watashi* and *atashi* for informal ones (McCraw, 2011, p. 42). Only in the case of informal greeting, Japanese men and women use different phonetic units. The Thai language divides personal pronouns according to social ranks, The Royalists, Buddhist Monks, and the Commoners (Yuphaphann, 1992, p. 198). The Thai commoners use thirteen monosyllabic words to denote the first-person pronouns of which three forms stand for the gender of the speaker: *dìchăn* for the female speaker, and *phom* and *kraphom* for the male speaker (p. 199). In the dialects of the Arabic language, in particular, of Yemen, the first-person pronoun for men is different from that of women. Men use *ana* while women use *ani* (Vanhove, 1995, p. 146).

In some cases, the gender of the referent is explicit in its use. Such use is realized and defined in a program called "gender-agreement" (Corbett, 1991, p. 105). In such nouns as *nurse* and *maid,* the gender-agreement denotes the feminine gender of the referent and presupposes the gender of the referee. In the instance 'I am a *nurse*' the referee *I* is supposed to belong to the feminine gender. But this linguistic function fails in three practical cases: first, when the gender of the referent is unidentifiable, for example, relative pronouns like *who*, and

epicene nouns like *friend* and *manager*; second, when "the referent is non-specific", for example, *someone*; third, when a noun denotes "a group of people of both sexes", for example, *villagers* (p. 218). These failures generate another semantic problem in the context where the gender of the referee is difficult to ascertain. For example, in the sentence "I am a friend of Stephen's" the referent *I* does not indicate the gender of the referee *I*. One of the possible forms of resolving this semantic problem in many Indo-European languages is to assume the gender of the noun as assigned by convention (p. 219). But convention runs on "the extent of sexism in language" (p. 220). In the assumption of gender, masculinity holds the majority and the highest probability of assignment. Hence the referee *I* of the aforesaid sentence is assumed to be masculine by convention.

Words, forming the linguistic reality of the world, share an intimate connection with gender-assignment. It is because "bodies cannot be said to have", as Judith Butler contends in *Gender Trouble* (1990), "a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender" (qtd in Livia, 2001, p. 15). The human body becomes a discursive category with the mark of gender that decides a gendered personal pronoun: "*is it a boy/girl*?"; *he/she* in compliance with the sex of the child (Livia, 2001, p. 16). Furthermore, language introduces the gendered body of the referee *I* to the world of signs through the course of gender-assignment. The origin of the linguistic gender is derived not only from the "distinctions of physiological sex that somehow become represented in language" but also from "the separation of the feminine out of masculine, both mythologically and grammatically" (Baron, 1986, p. 105-106). The masculine in the Indo-European languages is "more inclusive gender, serving as generic … as more worthy" and the feminine is "more limited in its range and importance, being only a variant of the masculine" (p. 107). These nominal categories "do reflect natural gender by Greek grammarians who saw language as a transcription of life" (p. 109). During the Middle Ages, the English language got rid of the grammatical gender to simplify grammar and learning for foreigners and to develop speech but retained "the metaphorical assignment of gender to such words as *sun, moon, earth, river*, even *English* itself in order to achieve a stylistic effect" (p. 109). Gender in the English language is "primarily natural", but "not entirely" because whenever the gender of a noun is non-referential or indeterminate, the masculine gender prevails over the feminine (p. 110). The preference for the masculine gender also owes to the literary practice of metaphorical gender assignment in accordance with Latin, Greek, or French (p. 110). This fact of masculinity, as more gender-worthy in forming the 'gender-agreement' of noun, establishes English as a gendered language that leaves out the feminine gender and underlines the male dominance under the guise of being neuter.

The sexist practice of gender-worthiness of the masculine is derived from the traditional conceptual framework of gender. Anna Livia introduces her book, *Pronoun Envy*, with the incident of the protest of women students in November 1971 at Harvard Divinity School against the practice of masculine reference to God and pronoun *he* for mankind in general (2001, p. 3). *Harvard Crimson*, the college in-house magazine, reports this incident as an act of 'pronoun envy'. Livia writes a whole book on this phrase to hold responsible for the sexist conceptual framework behind the accusation against *women*-student protesters. There, she contends that the phrase 'pronoun envy' refers to its precursor, 'penis envy', and

the coinage of the term to the popular perception of the women envious of the men for the lack of 'penis' (p. 4). She identifies this perception as a motif in Derrida's term 'phallogocentrisme' which similarly reflects the centrality of phallus at the signifying practice in Western philosophy (p. 5). Even "the first-person pronoun *I* [that] signifies man as an indefinite line placed alone or by himself at the center of things" and the second-person *you* that refers to the 'female' by the letter *u* joining two *i-s* are taken from Biblical myth of the creation of Adam and Eve (qtd in p. 6).

Like Anna Livia, Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* investigates the structural framework of the language as it is designed by men for systematic dominance and oppression of women. She finds patriarchy continues to validate, legitimize, and achieve dominance over the feminine gender in our daily life by limiting, ordering, classifying, and manipulating the world through the linguistic faculty of signification (1985, p. 3). Since the language operates through a collaboration of the material object and its concept, patriarchy utilizes the language to displace the actual image of the object with a biased patriarchal worldview. For example, Spender refers to Julia Stanley's finding in "Paradigmatic Woman: the Prostitute" (1973) of 'sexual inequality' which contends that there are 220 words for sexual promiscuity of women in comparison to 20 words for men (p. 15). Women are not only restricted lexically in articulation but also degraded at the basis of semiotics. The joint machinery of sexism and patriarchy has associated the signifying terms for women with negativity, unsuitability, insult, stigma, disenfranchisement, and sexual depravity (p. 16-19). The whole 'semantic space' keeps women out as it is evident in professional fields where the feminine epithets are coupled with the name of professions to mean a special category of professionals identifiable solely based on gender, for example, "a *lady* doctor, a *female* surgeon, a *woman* lawyer ... a wait*ress*, a steward*ess*, a major*ette*" (p. 20). The sexist language is "perpetuated and reinforced" through the sexist "observation of reality" (p. 141). The meaning or message of a communicational exchange is absent or "partially hidden" for women because the structure of language is "the product of male efforts" that accounts for "introducing sexism into the language": for example, there is no Hebrew word for a female deity in Old Testament (p. 145). Hence, the structural analysis of language and semiotics indexes to the [en]gendering tendency in the system of reference and the referent *I*, too, subscribes to this dominant male-centric linguistic worldview.

In this androcentric system of language, a gender non-specific noun, for example, *mankind* is assumed to be masculine in its property of gender. Furthermore, the word *man* is lexically used to denote the whole human race regardless of sex. The adjectives, *regardless* and *irrespective*, are often employed when a noun is used to refer to *species*, *genre*, *profession*, *class*, *race,* and *society* and the androcentric overtone of reference takes prominent shape. The androcentric tone becomes more audible when the speaker's identity is concealed. In a face-to-face conversation, the presence of the speaker-in-person informs the gender of referent *I*. But in writing, the speaker becomes a symbolic presence in the form of a proper noun or name and the referent *I*. In writing, especially in the first-person narrative, the speaker-narrator at times conceals gender among other forms of identity to sustain a nonnormative sexual identity. This leads to a major

hermeneutic problem because the reader remains confused with the gender of the referent *I*.

Literature: The Trope for Gender

During the 1970s and 80s, there develops a narrative strategy that fully exploits this hermeneutic problem out of gender non-specificity in the works of fiction produced in Western Europe, United States, and Canada: for example, Anne Garreta's *Sphinx* (1986), Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* (1969); Maureen Duffy's *Love Child* (1971); Sarah Caudwell's mysteries *Thus Was Adonis Murdered* (1981), *The Shortest Way to Hades* (1984), and *The Sirens Sanjj of Murder* (1988); and Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992) (Livia, 2001, p. 20). These works design a pronominal reference system contrary to the existing heteronormative one by turning off the grammatical indexes to the gender of the pronoun. In this deviant pronominal system, gender becomes a fact not given but explored out of practice and performance. Having failed the grammatical mark of gender identification, these works of fictions constitute a narrative strategy of suspense, manipulation, detection, and otherworldliness (p. 21-22).

Anne Garreta's *Sphinx* commences thus: "Remembering saddens me still, even years later. How many exactly, I don't know anymore" (2015, p. 1). Without mentioning a proper noun or name, the narrator continues with a referent *I* whose gender is unidentifiable even in relation to other characters. The narrator *I*, in order to conceal the nonnormative relation with partners, uses asterisk in their proper names: "At the end of the corridor we crossed paths with someone I would come to know later as A***, who, head shaved, was now coming out". Narrator's relation with A*** "was ceremonious at first": "after the kiss on the lips that everyone there was rewarded with upon arrival, I would listen to the details of A***'s day" (p. 8). But the head-shaven person, A***, requires "makeup of a completely different hue and variety than white skin" (p. 9). Then on the next page, the narrator *I* talks about a professor, "Padre***, a Spanish Jesuit" (p. 10). But the normative language compels the narrator *I* to refer to Padre*** with third person masculine pronoun *he*. Then "he proposed an outing he thought I might like, to a very exclusive nightclub" (p. 13). Their meeting for visits to a private nightclub, Apocryphe, continues and the narrator *I* senses that "he was hoping for a more intimate liaison, but falling in love with me would have posed him too many problems" (p. 15).

Here the referent *I* reveals no information about the gender of the narrator of *Sphinx*. Furthermore, the assumption of gender bends with the hermeneutic discovery of sexuality of the other characters, A*** and Padre***. A*** is a dancer, conventionally a feminine profession, with a shaven head, a sign of masculinity. But the fact that A*** wears make-up forms a definitive statement for femininity. The description of fashion is equally confusing with regards to gender. In a normative relation, if one is a woman then the other must be a man. If A*** is considered to be a woman with a shaven head, then the narrator is a man. But if the narrator is a man, then Padre*** seeking a liaison must be a woman. This textual analysis clarifies that: firstly, language bears a strong normative tendency in forming the notion of gender; secondly, nonnormative relations and queer

persons are indefinable because the 'man-made language' keeps women and the queer out; and finally, when the pronouns in particular, the first-person pronoun *I*, are gender non-specific, the reader has to rely solely on the context.

Context: A Play of Gender

But in cases where the gender of the referee is specific in the reported speech or face-to-face conversation, the message depends more on the context. In the following face-to-face conversation, John invites Michaela to go shopping.

> John: I need to buy clothes for my sister. Would you help?
> Michaela: Sure!
> John: Can we go to a nearby shopping mall?
> Michaela: Of course! When?
> John: Now!
> Michaela: I need time to get ready.
> John: I am waiting.

In John's reply, "I am waiting", it is assumed that John can decode the semantic load of Michaela's gendered expression which encrypts the message - 'I am a female and I want to apply make-up which takes time'. The feminine referee *I* paves the way for the message and gender sets up the context.

"Context", as Philosopher Kent Bach says, "is the conversational setting broadly construed" (qtd in Meibauer, 2012, p. 10). Bach's notion of conversational setting also involves mutual and relevant common knowledge. Through conversation speakers often share a common ground of culture: habits, rituals, greetings, and gestures. These facets of culture are expressed in terms of cues in contexts. The contextual cues, in turn, constitute representations of cultural meaning for a community or language ideology (Cameron, 2004, p. 447). In Michaela's statement, "I need time to get ready", it is the contextual cue that informs John why she needs time. The contextual cue is arguably the feminine habit of applying make-up before public exposure.

But it is still unclear why John associates the 'need for time' with a gendered habit. This association can be seen as an interrelationship between the 'language ideologies' and the interactive practices between men and women (Cameron, 2004). Gender is a salient feature of the language ideology which is reflected not only in a "gender-appropriate behavior but also in a gendered discourse on the nature of language (p. 449). Hence, Michaela's habit of taking time before going out is a gender-appropriate behavior with which John is habituated as an acquaintance; and his understanding of the necessity of make-up is relevant only in a gendered discourse because Michaela's statement doesn't provide any clue about the reason behind her need for time.

Michaela's act of applying make-up is a gender-specific performance and her statement connects the act with the notion of gender. Apart from ideology, gender can also be understood as "a social construct" and "speakers are seen as 'doing' gender – doing femininity or doing masculinity – in everyday interaction" (Coates, 2012, p. 96). The interlocutors present themselves as "gendered beings" and this doing-gender is conducted unconsciously under the assumption that being man/woman is "a unitary and unified experience" (1997, p. 285). Hence,

the act of applying make-up can be considered an act of doing gender which constitutes Michaela's being a feminine person. But in this act, the gender of referee *I* is twice constituted: first, in its anaphoric reference to the feminine proper noun; and second, in its grammatical reference to the act of doing gender. Besides, the act is absent in her locution. The absence of any visible marker for the act of applying make-up reflects the unconscious way of presupposing gender in the act of utterance.

The context in which John interacts with Michaela is charged with gender. John's request to Michaela is a gendered act since he is asking help to buy womenswear which requires gender-specific experience and preference. In the request, John performs the act of doing gender, unlike Michaela. While Michaela implicitly presupposes gender in the act of utterance, John explicitly refers to the gender-specific experience which is limited to buying menswear. Hence John's request involves two acts: one, the request; and two, the act of doing gender. Here, John's explicit reference to his masculinity in the context of buying womenswear implies that doing-gender is a context-bound performance (Coates, 1997).

Michaela agrees to help John. The agreement affirms a relation between John and Michaela which is based on the distinction between masculine and feminine gender. It is because masculinity and femininity in a heterogeneous discourse are "relational constructs", that is, "a male speaker is, among other things, performing not being a woman" (Coates, 2003, p. 36). While John constructs his masculinity by stating his limited experience in womenswear Michaela's consent acknowledges such gendered distinction.

Besides, the gender-specific discourses form the context of interpretation. Meaning is closely tied to some essential cultural factors associated with gender. Deborah Tannen's book *You Just Don't Understand* (1990) illustrates how gendered differences in conversation style or 'genderlect' can lead to a misunderstanding between the interlocutors of heteronormative relations. Men and women share categorically different cultural universe even in the same household, religion, class, race, and country (1990, p. 43). Tannen identifies that the purpose of talk for women is intimacy and for men is independence; expectation in the conversation for women is connection while for men it is status. These essential cultural differences form different purposes, expectations, and interpretations out of the conversation. For these cultural differences, the man-woman conversation is a cross-cultural communication (1990, p. 18). In the conversation between John and Michaela, these cross-cultural differences are resolved in the peculiar act of agreement between them. The agreement is peculiar because both of them enact a sort of reconciliation between different expectations, interpretations, and interactions. This reconciliation is achieved by the tacit approval of each other's gender. Michaela understands why John needs help in shopping and John understands why Michaela needs time. This understanding of gender underlines the linguistic and semantic problems associated with gender.

Gender in Conversation: A Local, Emergent, and Contingent System

In cases where the speaker and the listener deliberately avoid gendered topics, discourse style, and behavior, gender becomes more dynamic. At this point,

context becomes a field of activity where participants produce the categories of gender and act to "accomplish in those productions" (Speer and Stokoe p. 15). Unlike the case of John and Michaela where gender operates as a linguistic category, the following conversation, taken from Stockill and Kitzinger's article (2007), showcases gender as an interactional category.

In a telephone conversation, Stan talks to Penny about a forty-year-old man's reaction to his long hair:

36	"Sta:	I don't understa:nd it. I do:n't
37		uh scallies and (.) everyone (.)=**
38		=mentio:n (.) long hai:r when I'm on on a- Like
39		((mimics)) "Oo:h hah hah hah hah" (think).hh
40		"Look at the fine head of hai:r".=I heard that.
41		=I heard that= an' I thought "they're ta:lking
42		about me and Kev", and like I thought "w- wh
43		what you doing man. You- you're like for:ty:.
44		You know. You- you're a grown man and you've
45		still not go- got over the fact that- that some
46		peo:ple have- have quite long hair." (p. 225-226)

The monologue demonstrates the joint play of ideology and discourse of gender in the context. Stan's object to sexist comment on his long hair charges the ideology or belief of the harasser with a narrow conceptual framework at odds with a man of 'for:ty'. The description of the 'grown man' turns the conversation into a discourse on gender where hair plays the role of gender-shifter and implies that 'long hair' is a stigma for males. The referent *I* in the opening sentence maintains the linguistic category of gender by frequent references to long hair with occasional hedges and laughter. The hedges and laughter indicate Stan's awareness of gender inappropriate fashion with long hair. For 'everyone' long hair is inappropriate because Stan belongs to the masculine gender. Hair is used not as a referent to gender but as a category. Stan uses a gender non-specific referent 'people' to suggest the categorization of people with 'quite long hair'. There is another gender non-specific referent, that is, 'everyone'. Together these referents form the case of gender neutrality in conversation. But in this case, the gender is maintained in interactional techniques such as hedges and laughter. The interactional gender in these referents, 'everyone' and 'people', shows the local, contingent, and context-specific capacity of reference without explicitly naming the category of gender.

Clare Jackson in the chapter entitled "The Gendered *I*" from the book, *Conversation and Gender,* demonstrates how the grammatically neuter *I* turns out to be interactionally gendered. In her analysis, Jackson magnifies the role of context as a contingent to the linguistic environment where the local use subverts the universal norm. Citing Schegloff, Jackson states that first-person pronoun *I* is "the default practice for doing self-reference" (2011, p. 33). For example

01	"Sta:	I'm just waiting I just want my mum to
02		sort out this t- ticket and tell me what I'm
03		doing because like I'll just stuff it up won't I." (p. 34)

In contrast to the third-person pronouns, he/she, Jackson argues, *I* is a grammatically more problematic form of reference. For example,

```
01  "Pen:    [I sa(h)y that thou(hh)gh:
02  Sta:     No but that shouldn't- why- why would
03           you say that, you- you've got
04           [longer] hair than me::
05  Pen:    [.hh    ]
06                   (.)
07  Pen:    Huh huh I'm a °girl° [haHAHAHA .hhhh ]
08  Sta:   [Yeah ye- d- what]" (p. 35)
```

In this conversation, Penn and Stan reveal their categorical information of gender with additional cues in context: "you've got [longer] hair than me". The specific use of a feminine referent,'[longer] hair', downplays the explicitly gendered use of the referent *I* in Penn's statement: "Huh huh I'm a °girl°". This instance becomes clearer in the following conversation:

```
01  "Sop:  But is she a Mosher.
02            (0.7)
03  Emm: Yeah
04            (0.8)
05  Sop:   But I'm really gir:ly huhuhu=
06  Emm: =↑Wh:at?
07  Sop:   .hhh but I'm really gir:ly.
08            (1.4)
09  Emm: Well she's turning me into a Mosher so
10            (0.9) better get used to it hhh.hhh" (p. 36)
```

Sophie uses the gendered term 'gir:ly' in contrast to an absent referee 'she'. Since 'she' is a gendered reference, 'gir:ly' is coupled with a qualifier, 'really', to emphasize the higher degree of a categorical membership to the feminine gender.

In the last two examples of conversation, referent *I* is used as the category of gender explicitly. Jackson presents three instances where "the gendered *I* occurs in an environment in which gender has already 'crept into' the talk" (p. 44). In the first instance, Stan comments "Are y- No. Why woul- why the hell / would I be hot? Girls have long hai:r" (p. 40). Jackson observes that the *I* is a default self-reference but "in the production of the contrastive category 'girls' in his next turn.....*I* is, retrospectively, gendered" (p. 41). In the second instance, Michael in conversation with his fifteen-year-old sister comments: "Unless it's when/*I* am taking a girl out, then she should pay", (p. 42). Here, the referent *I* invokes an occasion which marks the heteronormative relation without declaring that 'I am a boy'. The girl (Michael's absent-in-conversation girlfriend) 'should pay' unless she is with referee *I* (Michael) indicates the popular norm for a man taking responsibility of a woman. The context 'taking a girl out', a date, is linked thus to another context 'she should pay', a payment. The context of date informs retrospectively the categorical membership of referent *I* to the masculine gender. Lastly, Mary, a fifteen-year-old girl, talks with Amy about her adjustment with the break-up of a relationship with Dan:

```
01  "Mar:   Libby made me feel better 'cause
02           she said (.) well boys after a long
03           relationship they [tend to    ]kind of (.)=
04  Amy:    [((coughs))]
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05  Mar:     =go downhill with girls whereas
06          girls go uphill.
07          (0.4)
08  Amy:    [Mm::::
09  Mar:    [So I've gone for Tom who's uphill.
10          (0.5)
11  Mar:    Dan's gone for Tess who's downhill"  (p. 43)
```

Jackson contends that the first person *I* in line no. 9 is not Mary-the-person, but the type of girls who have 'gone…uphill'. Here, the referent *I* indicates the normative conduct that ensures her categorical membership. Hence, it is made clear that the referent *I* can form gendered identities in terms of "emergent, locally occasioned features of on-going talk-in-interaction" (p. 45).

Conclusion

The first-person pronoun consists of two points of reference: one, a referee; and two, a referent. The referent *I* is a unique linguistic phenomenon because it varies with the speaker or referee. The referent *I* of John is different from the referent *I* of Michaela because John and Michaela are different individuals with different genders. The referent *I* embodies certain information of the referee in the instance of utterance which includes the gender and the proper name. The referent *I* in the English language is neuter but in the other languages such as Japanese, Thai, and Arabic, it is gendered. English is a gendered language and as a part of the language, the referent *I* has a tendency of getting gendered. The en-gendering of the referent *I* takes place in its relation to the speaker. The gender of the referent *I* depends on the referee *I*. Since the referee *I* is a context-bound reference, in relation to gender the referent *I* is also bound to the context despite being a free grammatical unit. The fact that the referent *I* has a gendered tendency becomes more evident in the context of queer texts where proper names are avoided to make the referee gender non-specific. But in the face-to-face conversation, where the gender of the referee is identifiable, interpretation of gendered expressions depends on contextual cues and the gender of the referent *I* works as a linguistic category. In the cases where gender is avoided in topic, style, and behavior, gender becomes more dynamic and acts like an interactional category in which the gender non-specific referents imply gender in the suggestion of categorical membership. Hence, the linguistic phenomenon of referent *I* is a local, contingent, and context-specific system of reference in relation to the gender of the referee.

Since the paper pays an exclusive attention to the first-person pronoun in the singular case, it has intentionally avoided the analysis of the second and the third-person pronouns, and the plural case. Furthermore, the nature of referent *I* is discussed broadly in the context of heterosexual relation; and the gender is primarily understood in the binary terms of heterosexuality. The nonnormative identity of a speaker can generate more linguistic problems with the first-person pronoun *I*. The paper excludes such problems in the discussion to focus its primary investigation on the gendered nature of the first-person pronoun.

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