

Who am I talking to when I'm talking to myself? A cross-linguistic study

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Holmberg (2010) has observed that both *I* and *you* may be felicitously employed in self-talk, albeit with different restrictions. According to Ritter & Wiltschko (2021), these restrictions suggest that *I*-centered self-talk is a way of thinking out loud rather than addressing someone, whereas *you*-centered self-talk is a conversation with oneself as the addressee. This talk focuses on the use of *you*-centred self-talk in two types of languages with more than one 2nd person singular pronoun: (i) languages with a two-way formality distinction in 2nd person pronouns, such as German and French and (ii) languages with larger 2nd person pronoun inventories whose forms are distinguished by nuanced sociolinguistic content (age, gender, relation to speaker, etc.), such as Korean and Japanese. Languages with a two-way formality distinction allow *you*-centred self-talk with the unmarked 2nd person pronoun, but not the formal one, as illustrated with German in (1):

- (1) a. Du bist ein Idiot. b. ??? Sie sind ein Idiot. *German*
2SG are an idiot 3PL are an idiot
'You are an idiot.' (informal) 'You are in idiot.' (formal)

We hypothesize that the reason (1b) is unacceptable as self-talk is that the formal pronoun requires social distance, that is a separation of the speaker and addressee, and such distancing or separation is incompatible with self-talk.

Turning to languages with larger 2nd person pronoun inventories, we observe that *I*-centred self-talk is felicitous, but *you*-centred self-talk is avoided altogether. This is illustrated in (2) and (3) for Korean and Japanese, respectively. (This data was obtained from a pilot study with a fieldwork methodology; we are currently running a larger online study to verify these patterns are robust.)

- (2) na-nun / ??? ne-nun cengmal papo-ya. *Korean*
1-TOP / 2-TOP really idiot-be.PRES.COMP
'I'm / ??? You're such an idiot!'
- (3) watashi/??? anta /??? omae wa baka da *Japanese*
1 / 2 / 2 TOP idiot be
'I'm / ??? You're an idiot!'

Importantly, the reason for the infelicity of formal pronouns in languages like German cannot be extended to account for the avoidance of *you*-centred self-talk in Korean and Japanese, as even forms that are used with friends and family are not felicitous. We propose that in these languages there is no unmarked 2nd person pronoun, and consequently all options require separation of speaker and addressee, but not necessarily social distance. In other words, any type of sociolinguistic content necessitates a separation of the interlocutors. Evidence for this comes from the observation made by some of our Korean and Japanese consultants that they could use *you*-centered self-talk if addressing their reflection. In this context, the addressee-self is separated from the speaker-self. Note, however, that the 2nd person pronouns that become available do not include those that – like *Sie* – encode social-distance. These findings indicate that *you*-centred self-talk can be conceptualized in two different ways because the individual engaging in self-talk can take the perspective of either the speaker or the addressee, but not both. In mirror-supported *you*-centred self-talk, they take the perspective of the speaker addressing an externalized addressee. In *you*-centred self-talk without a mirror, they take the perspective of the addressee and treat the speaker as “tak[ing] on the voices of others” (Gacea, 2020: 34). The fact that the conceptualization of the addressee determines the well-formedness of different pro-forms supports the view that there is a linguistic representation of interaction, as originally proposed by Ross (1970).

References

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