

A typological and questionnaire-based approach to the human impersonal pronouns in Afrikaans

The last decade has seen increasing interest in human impersonal pronouns (HIPs). They have been studied extensively in European languages (e.g. Siewierska 2011) and West Germanic in particular (e.g. van der Auwera et al. 2012). Afrikaans, however, has not received much attention, despite, for instance, its interesting relation to the “sandwich distribution” of the ‘man’-pronoun in European West Germanic: it is very much alive in German, has been lost entirely in English and appears to be on its way out in Dutch (see Weerman 2006). Afrikaans no longer has ancestral *men* but is developing a new ‘man’-pronoun, i.e. (*'n*) *mens* ‘(a) human’. The internet example in (2), with a suppletive second person singular form, suggests that it may even be acquiring a second one, i.e. (*'n*) *man* ‘(a) man’. The other HIPs in Afrikaans are *hulle* ‘they’ and *jy* ‘you (singular)’.

- (1) (*'n*) *Mens mag nooit drink en bestuur nie.*
INDEF.SG human may never drink.INF and drive.INF NEG
‘One should not drink and drive.’
- (2) *Man moet jouself geestelik reg kry.*
man must 2SG.REFL mental right get.INF
‘One should sort oneself out mentally.’

This paper aims to provide the first description of their functional distribution in Present-day Afrikaans, examine what this description can contribute to our understanding of HIPs from a typological perspective and test the usefulness of two types of questionnaire for the study of HIPs. More precisely, we asked half of the roughly 150 students of Afrikaans at the North-West University Potchefstroom to read 26 short passages illustrating 13 different contexts of use and, for each passage, to rate the acceptability on a 5-point scale of the various HIPs in a clause completing it. The other half were given the same passages but were asked to fill in the slot of the HIP themselves so that the clause is about people in general or people that the speaker cannot/does not want to identify in any way. The results were analyzed statistically: descriptive statistics, i.e. means and standard deviations, for the various HIPs in general and in the various uses and factorial analyses of variance with sociolinguistic factors as variables. Our main research questions and some of the initial findings are discussed below.

First, how are the Afrikaans HIPs distributed over the various functions identified in two recent semantic maps, i.e. Siewierska & Papastathi (2011) and Gast & van der Auwera (2013)? A first look at the judgments suggests considerable variation in the acceptability of (*'n*) *man* as a HIP and a clear division of labor between, on the one hand, *hulle*, i.e. universal-external (e.g. ‘in Bali, they eat dragonflies’) and existential uses, and, on the other hand, (*'n*) *mens* and *jy*, i.e. universal-inclusive uses (e.g. ‘one only lives once’). These results show that, unlike the ‘man’-pronouns in Dutch and German, (*'n*) *mens* has not (yet?) grammaticalized beyond a human non-referential indefinite, which may be due to its preference for second person singular suppletive forms. As to the existential uses, Siewierska & Papastathi (2011) make a distinction between specific (e.g. ‘they’re knocking on the door, it’s Mary’), inferred (e.g. ‘they’ve eaten pizza here, I can smell it’) and vague (e.g. ‘they’ve found your bike’) contexts whereas Gast & van der Auwera (2013) distinguish number-neutral contexts (e.g. ‘they’ve found your bike’ may involve one or more finders) from clearly plural ones (e.g. ‘they’ve gathered here for a party’). To test the two dimensions, the questionnaire included specific, inferred and vague passages with a number-neutral reading as well as ones with an explicitly plural reading. The initial findings indicate that they interact in that, for instance, *hulle* is judged slightly less acceptable in specific than in vague contexts and, in turn, slightly less acceptable in number-neutral than in plural contexts.

Second, do *'n mens* and *mens* differ in (socio)linguistic terms? The preliminary results indicate

that, on the whole, they are both acceptable in the same contexts, which means that a form-function correlation is lacking in the incipient grammaticalization of this HIP since the loss of the article is usually taken as a sign of a higher level of grammaticalization (see Giacalone Ramat & Sansò 2007), and that, for both variants, forms such as the repeated subject (*'n mens*, the possessive *'n mens se* and the reflexive *mensself* meet with surprisingly broad acceptance, in spite of the fact that suppletive forms of the second person singular are prescribed here (see Donaldson 1993). The variation in acceptability that is attested between *'n mens* and *mens* seems to be highly idiolectal, with a slightly higher overall score for the article-less variant among men than among women, as women tend to be more conservative in their use of Afrikaans (see Raidt 1995) and exhibit a preference for the more prestigious form here (see Prinsloo & Odendaal 1995).

Third, and finally, do HIPs always constitute the most common strategy for impersonalization and, if not, which other strategies does Afrikaans use? Despite the completion task's limitations in not allowing passives among other things, a first look at the results appears to confirm Siewierska & Papastathi's (2011) claim that HIPs are actually rarely used existentially, which could be linked to the aforementioned acceptability judgments about *hulle* in such contexts. Unlike in the universal uses, where HIPs dominate, informants are very often found to use the indefinite pronoun *iemand* 'someone', for instance, in the specific number-neutral cases and the indefinite noun phrase *mense* 'humans/people', for instance, in the evidential use (e.g. 'they say that ...', which features in Siewierska & Papastathi 2011 but not in Gast & van der Auwera 2013).

In short, the paper provides a description of the functional range of the HIPs in Afrikaans and has implications for the combinability of the two existing semantic maps, the role of sociolinguistic/idiolectal variation in incipient grammaticalization and the status of the existential uses in a map of HIPs. These results also show the usefulness of a double questionnaire approach.

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