

The development, pragmatics of and social norms for Danish personal pronouns

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Abstract

The morphological system of personal pronouns in modern Danish is quite complex and unstable compared to the English system; it has reflexive pronouns in oblique and genitive case: *sig, sin, sit, sine* that refer to the subject of the finite verb and are distinguished from the personal pronouns *ham (him), hans (his), hende (her), hendes (her), den (it), dens (its), det (it), dets (its)*. Second person personal pronouns carry a particular heavy pragmatic meaning because they refer to the addressee, and in addition presuppose, signal and impose semantic information about the interlocutors and the interpersonal relationship between them; their use has changed dramatically through times. In our days people try to invent new gender pronouns about generic referents and about specific referents, depending on their sexual identity.

Keywords

personal pronouns, genitive case, plural, reflexive pronouns, address forms, third person generic pronouns, third person specific pronouns, gender, sex.

All parts of language change and develop through time, but while changes in morphology and syntax often are changes of the system of forms caused by sound shifts, the system of Danish pronoun forms haven't changed much for a thousand years, while the meaning and use of pronouns have changed many times and nowadays is one of the most discussed topics of linguistic correctness. The changes in the meaning of pronouns are not caused by sound developments but by historical changes in social relations in society.

Five questions about Danish personal pronouns will be investigated in the following: 1. How many personal pronouns are still left in modern Danish compared to modern English? 2. What's the meaning and use of reflexive pronouns? 3. What's the pragmatics of second person pronouns? 4. How to express the concept of a generic person. 5. Is it possible to introduce new forms of third person specific pronouns?

Pronouns are defined as words that in a clause can substitute for a noun or a noun phrase referring to an entity already known by the addressee from either linguistic or situational context. In example (1) (without any emphatic stress) the pronoun *hun (she)* substitutes for the proper name *Mary*, and *hende (her)* substitutes for the name *Susanne* yielding the meaning 'Mary saw Susanna, but Mary didn't recognize Susanna'. Utterance (2) pronounced with extra, contrastive stress (notated by ^{lx}) on *hun* and *hende* has the meaning 'Mary saw Susanne, but Susanne didn't see Mary'.

- (1) Mary så Susanne, men hun genkendte hende ikke
Mary saw Susanne, but she recognised her not
Mary saw Susanna, but Mary didn't recognize Susanne
- (2) Mary så Susanne, men ^{lx}hun så ikke ^{lx}hende
Mary saw Susanne, but she saw not her
Mary saw Susanne, but Susanne didn't see Mary

Pronouns are shifters in the sense that their referents shift dependently of either the linguistic or the situational context.

In grammar several classes of pronouns are distinguished: personal pronouns, e.g. *you, she*; possessive pronouns, e.g. *my, his*; demonstrative pronouns, e.g. *this, that*; interrogative pronouns, e.g. *who, which*; reciprocal pronouns, e.g. *each other*; reflexive pronouns, e.g. *myself, himself*; indefinite pronouns, e.g. *anyone, nobody*; and relative pronouns, e.g. *who, whom*.

Personal pronouns are words that refer to participants in a situation already known by the interpreters, namely the speaker (first person) *I*, and the addressee (second person) *you*, and somebody or something else (third person) *he, she, it*. First and second person pronouns have always exophoric reference, i.e., to persons in the speech situation, while third person pronouns have either exophoric reference to something here or there in the speech situation, or endophoric reference, i.e., reference, not to something present in the speech situation but in the 'world' of things established by and in the discourse, the situation talked about (McGregor 1997).

In Peircean semiotics personal pronouns are often classified as indexes because they sort of 'point to' one of the interlocutors or something in the room. But the concept of 'index' has, by Peirce and others, been defined in many ways that are not always compatible nor consistent. It has caused a lot of confusion in semiotics. Indexes are said in various definitions of the concept to involve four phenomena: pointing, causality, particularity, and deixis.

Pronouns have nothing to do with real pointing with a finger. Pronouns are conventional linguistic signs with double articulation (one articulation in morphemes and another in graphemes or phonemes); in writing they consist of sequences of letters bounded by spaces and in speech by phonemes bounded by auditory juncture features.

Pointing is not a sign, not even a natural sign (in Grice's sense); apes don't react to pointing (Tomasello 2014). Pointing is only part of a sign; it always occurs in a situation in which some other information is accessible for the interpreters, information that makes up a necessary part of a composite sign: (pointing at a bird): *That is a bird*. Pronouns can be accompanied by pointing but are not – in any sense – an example of pointing.

Causality is said to be the ground for dark clouds being an index of coming rain, and footprints being a sign of someone having been there. Causality is omnipresent, always particular, and not criterial for something being a sign. Personal pronouns have no connection whatsoever with causality. But many other communicative signs involve causality, e.g., photographs and measuring instruments such as thermometers and weathercocks.

Particularity is often mentioned as characteristic for indexes, and pronouns always refer to individuals or sets of individuals, and not to categories, at least not the same way as nouns do. But they in fact also involve categories, not classes of things but dynamic and functional categories of the actual speech situation; pronouns refer to the speaker and the addressees or to other things including discourse topics. Discourse topics are shared knowledge among the interlocutors and in this indirect way part of the speech situation.

Deixis is definitely a feature of first- and second-person personal pronouns *I, you*, but also a feature of other parts of speech, of adverbs *here, there, now, soon*, nouns as address terms *father* (bare form), verbs in imperative *Go!* Third person pronouns are not deictic. Deictic words, including first- and second-person personal pronouns, mention and identify persons, times and places as either proximal (*I, here, now, this*) or distal (*you, there, an hour ago, soon, that*).

Pronouns have to be defined in other ways than as indexes, and that requires a definition of the concept of a ‘communicative sign’ that involves not only (as in Peirce’s definition) “somebody for whom something stands for something” (Peirce 1897), but also the speaker, the person who produces and utters the form of the sign, as well as the persons who are addressed, and the situation in which the sign is uttered. Pronouns have what is called non-natural meaning by H.P.Grice (1957). He defines non-natural meaning as meaning that involves that the speaker uttered X with the intention of inducing in the addressees a belief by means of their recognition of this intention. By pronouns the speaker refers to definite persons or things which are known and identifiable by the addressees, by means of shorthand forms that – like definite nouns – indicate to the addressees that the information about the persons or things is given and definite.

English and Danish languages have both developed from a common Old Germanic language, but after reduction of the morphological system of personal pronouns the modern English system involve 28 forms:

Table 1. Personal pronouns in English.

CASE	NOMINATIVE CASE		OBLIQUE CASE		GENITIVE CASE		REFLEXIVE	
PERSON	SINGULAR	PLURAL	SINGULAR	PLURAL	SINGULAR	PLURAL	SINGULAR	PLURAL
FIRST PERSON	<i>I</i>	<i>We</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>Us</i>	<i>My</i>	<i>our</i>	<i>myself</i>	<i>ourselves</i>
SECOND PERSON	<i>You</i>				<i>your</i>		<i>yourself</i>	<i>yourselves</i>
THIRD PERSON	<i>he</i> <i>she</i> <i>it</i>	<i>they</i>	<i>him</i> <i>her</i> <i>it</i>	<i>Them</i>	<i>his</i> <i>hers</i> <i>its</i>	<i>their</i>	<i>himself</i> <i>herself</i> <i>itself</i>	<i>themselves</i>

From the Old Germanic system, the Danish system has kept some of the forms inflected in gender, number, and case, but not all. What is left in Danish language of the inflection of personal pronouns after a thousand years of linguistic development is complicated and asymmetrical and can most economically be shown as in this table with 45 forms:

Table 2. Personal pronouns in Danish.

CASE		NOMINATIVE CASE		OBLIQUE CASE		GENITIVE' CASE	
PRONOUNS	PERSON	SINGULAR	PLURAL	SINGULAR	PLURAL	SINGULAR	PLURAL
PERSONAL	FIRST PERSON	<i>jeg</i>	<i>vi</i>	<i>mig</i>	<i>Os</i>	<i>min³, mit, mine,</i>	<i>vores</i>
	PERSON	<i>(vi²)</i>		<i>(os²)</i>		<i>(vor^{2,3,4}, vort, vore)</i>	<i>vor^{3,4}, vort, vore</i>
PERSONAL	SECOND PERSON	<i>Du</i>	<i>I,</i>	<i>Dig</i>	<i>jer,</i>	<i>din³, dit, dine</i>	<i>jeres,</i>
	PERSON	<i>De⁵</i>	<i>De⁵</i>	<i>Dem⁵</i>	<i>Dem⁵</i>	<i>Deres⁵</i>	<i>Deres⁵</i>

	THIRD PERSON	<i>han⁶ hun</i>		<i>ham⁶ hende</i>		<i>hans⁶ hendes</i>	
		<i>den det</i>		<i>den det</i>	<i>Dem</i>	<i>dens dets</i>	<i>deres</i>
			<i>de</i>				
REFLEXIVE ⁷				<i>sig</i>		<i>sin³, sit, sine</i>	<i>deres</i>

Notes to table 2

1. In modern Danish genitive of personal pronouns cannot be distinguished from possessive pronouns; in old Norse there were two distinct word classes.
2. First person plural pronoun referring to a single person is exemplified in official documents, and the editorial *we* is used by many newspapers and non-fiction texts. See section 3!
3. In genitive singular the pronoun is inflected like an adjective according to the grammatical gender of the subsequent noun in common gender, neuter gender or plural, e.g., *min-mit-mine*.
4. The normal form of genitive plural today is *vores*, which is not inflected according to the gender of the noun. But an older and more pompous form is *vor*, which is inflected as an adjective: *vor-vort-vore* e.g., *Vor Herre* (Our Lord).
5. Second person pronouns have two types of forms, either forms presupposing and signaling closeness and informality: *du-dig-din* and plural *I-jer jeres*, or forms presupposing and signaling remoteness, formality and politeness (forms that are the same as third person plural pronoun written with initial capital) *De-Dem-Deres* and plural: *De-Dem-Deres*. See section 3!
6. In third person singular of personal pronouns (and only here) persons (including pets, dolls, and ships) are discriminated according to sex of the mentioned person in *han* (*he*) and *hun* (*she*); animals, things and matters are discriminated according to the grammatical gender of the antecedent of the anaphoric pronoun in *den* (*it*, common) and *det* (*it*, neuter). See section 4 and 5!
7. In Danish there is a certain third person reflexive pronoun only in oblique case: *sig* (the same form for singular and plural), and genitive singular (inflected as an adjective): *sin-sit-sine* and plural: *deres*. See section 2!

2. Danish reflexive pronouns

One of the most discussed topics in linguistic correctness in Denmark is the distinction between the reflexive pronoun and the personal pronouns. Danish language has a special type of third person reflexive pronouns not known in English: *sig* and *sin-sit-sine*. It refers to either the grammatical subject of a finite verb, or the logical subject of an infinite verb. Reflexive pronouns are in opposition to third-person personal pronouns: *ham-hans*, *hende-hendes*, *dem-deres*. These third person pronouns refer to some other known person than the one referred to by the subject. The ambiguous English clause (3) is translated into Danish as either (4) meaning ‘behind herself’, or (5) meaning ‘behind another woman mentioned previously’.

- (3) She closed the door behind her
- (4) Hun lukkede døren bag sig
- (5) Hun lukkede døren bag hende.

The English personal pronoun *her* is equivalent to either the reflexive pronoun *sig*, referring to the same person as the grammatical or logical subject of the clause, or to the personal pronoun *hende*, referring to another person than the subject (Allan et al. 1995).

Where Danish has reflexive pronoun, English often uses a personal pronoun:

- (6) Hun mødte sin_{REFLEXIVE PRONOUN} bror
She met her_{PERSONAL PRONOUN} brother

In some cases, the Danish reflexive pronoun has the same function as English *-self*-forms, e.g.

- (7) De forsøgte at forsvare sig
They tried to defend themselves

and in some other cases the Danish transitive verb is translated into an English verb that is intransitive, e.g. (8)

- (8) Føler du dig syg?
feel you^{NOM} you^{OBL} ill,
Are you feeling ill?

In some Danish dialects in Jutland the system is the same as in English with examples like

- (9) Han tog hans hat og gik hans vej
He took his (own) hat and went (along) his (own) way
He took his hat and went away

This sentence sounds rubbish in Danish standard language because here it means: ‘He took another man’s hat and went (along) another man’s way’. In standard language the reflexive meaning is expressed as (10)

- (10) Han tog sin hat og gik sin vej.

People using *hans* instead of *sin* have by modern standard speaking people for many years been considered less intelligent or even stupid. It is one of the most corrected forms in writing exercises, and most discussed in readers’ letters in newspapers.

This distinction has been part of Danish language for ten centuries, although less used in certain dialects, and although the rules to be followed are questionable and inconsistent. In the so-called accusative + infinitive constructions after verbs of perception most Danish language users will independently of whether the owner of the dog is John or Peter, be in doubt whether to choose *sin* or *hans* in (10):

- (11) John så Peter sparke sin/hans hund
John saw Peter kick his dog

The grammatical question is the following: is the reflexive pronoun referring to the grammatical subject of the finite verb, John, or to the logical subject of the infinitive, Peter? As a listener you will not know. Despite this uncertainty the reflexive pronoun *sig-sin-sit-sine* has been used since the first runic inscriptions until our days.

But in the last 10 years the distinction between *sig* and *ham-hende* seems to vanish (Vikner & Ehlers 2017). All types of people (and not only elderly dialect speaking Jutlanders) can be heard saying something like (9) meaning 'he took his (own) hat and went (along) his (own) way'. Why is it happening right now?

One explanation could be that most Danes are exposed so much to English in advertising, TV and films that they follow the simple, but ambiguity creating English rules instead of the complicated and in a way inconsistent Danish rules. Much of the trendy vocabulary in advertising is already English *sale, value for money, craftsmanship, waterproof, gift card, shopping bag*, although Danish has words denoting the same: *udsalg, værdi for pengene, håndværksmæssigt, vandtæt, gavekort, indkøbstaske*. English vocabulary is becoming a sociolect of smart people in Denmark. Perhaps also English syntax is becoming the smart norm for Danish reflexive pronouns.

3. Second Person pronouns

Second person personal pronouns carry a heavy pragmatic meaning because they are used as address forms. That means that they not only convey conventional or literal meaning, but also conversational implicatures (Grice 1975). Conversational meaning is only found in the rhetorical situation with a specific speaker and a specific addressee and can even change through time in the same conversation according to the mood of the interlocutors.

Although Danish first name, second name, kinship terms, *hr. (Mr.), fru (Mrs.), frk. (Miss)*, titles or name of occupation are normally used as invocation, second person pronouns cannot be avoided in the utterance. They refer to the addressee, but in addition they presuppose, or have as implicature meaning that signal and impose some unnecessary semantic information about the interlocutors and the interpersonal relationship between them.

Like other European languages Old Danish had a status system with a singular form of you: *du* (developed from *thu*), and a plural form of you: *I* (written as a capital and pronounced like *i* in *ill*). The plural form was used addressing a single person of higher social status, thus metaphorically signaling the speaker's servility and deference to the addressee. The system was grounded in a society with social classes and superiors was addressed as *I* by both inferiors and equals, and inferiors were titled *du* by both superiors and equals. The status system was asymmetrical between two people of different social class, and symmetric between people of common class. All pluralities of people were invoked by the plural you: *I*.

The same metaphor determines first person plural *vi* (we) used by the king about himself as a single person being as powerful as many persons; it is in stylistics called pluralis majestatis. The Danish king Frederik VI answered in 1835 to a request for freedom of the press with (12)

indicating that he was an absolute monarch and insisted in censorship.

- (12) Vi alene vide
 we alone know
 Only I know

First Person with plural form and singular meaning is also used in newspapers and scientific texts indicating the opposite position, namely that the author is just one humble member of a collective of people without whom it had not been possible to make the text; it is called pluralis modestiae.

There was one important exception to the power of plurality, namely that God was addressed *du* although he was believed to belong to a special (highest?) class of creatures. The explanation is presumably that the *du*-form signaled a heartfelt and strictly personal relation.

Table 3. Second person pronouns singular

THE STATUS SYSTEM IN OLD DANISH		ADDRESSEE	
		SUPERIOR	INFERIOR
SPEAKER	SUPERIOR	<i>I</i>	<i>Du</i>
	INFERIOR		

But how do we know how people spoke orally to each other when we only have (formal) written texts handed down from the old language. Documentation of how people used the spoken address forms in older days can be found in fictional literature. In Ludvig Holberg’s play from 1723, *Erasmus Montanus*, a young student, Rasmus Berg, comes back to his village from Copenhagen where he in Latin has been studying rhetoric a couple of years at the university. He visits his peasant parents and intends to get married to his betrothed Lisbed from the next-door farm. It emerges from the play how he addresses the various people he meets. To his parents, his future parents-in-law, the parish clerk and a lieutenant he uses *I*; to his brother and to his betrothed he uses *du*. His parents call him *du*, his parents-in-law, the parish clerk and the lieutenant call him *I* – in accordance with the status system described.

But during the centuries a rival norm of solidarity developed with a distinction between close and remote, near and far, in-group and out-group: Mutual *I* became the usual form for strangers expressing formality and remoteness, and mutual *du* was for brothers and sisters, lovers, spouses, close friends, comrades and schoolfellows expressing solidarity, intimacy and shared fate (Brown 1970).

Two competing norms resulted in a mix and made speech situations unstable: Superiors could call intimate superiors both *I* and *du*, and superiors could call foreign inferiors both *du* and *I*. People could, however, avoid Second Person pronouns and instead address their interlocutors with nouns that indicated their relevant role or status in definite form, e.g.

- (13) Jeg vil bede lægen komme straks
 I will ask doctor-the come immediately
 Will you please come immediately?

Furthermore, they could refer to the second person by third person pronouns:

- (14) Hvornår kan han komme?
 when will he come?
 When will you come?

The use of third person pronouns about the addressee has in this way suspended the expression of both solidarity and power.

Table 4. Second person pronouns singular

TWO NORMS SYSTEM: STATUS AND SOLIDARITY		ADDRESSEE	
		SUPERIOR	INFERIOR
SPEAKER	SUPERIOR	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100px; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px; text-align: center;"><i>han-hun</i></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100px; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px; text-align: center;"><i>I</i></div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100px; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px; text-align: center;"><i>han-hun</i></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100px; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px; text-align: center;"><i>I, du</i></div>
	INFERIOR	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100px; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px; text-align: center;"><i>han-hun</i></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100px; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px; text-align: center;"><i>I</i></div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100px; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px; text-align: center;"><i>han-hun</i></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100px; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px; text-align: center;"><i>du</i></div>

'x\y' = remote\close. Gray = equal relation

In the Holberg's play Rasmus' brother at first calls him *du* and *brother* (in accordance with both systems), but Rasmus asks him not to "dutte" him, i.e. call him *du*, and then the brother addresses him *I*, *Monsøren* (distorted *monsieur* in definite form) or *han-ham* (third person pronoun *he-him*,

NB about second person), as an expression of enforced deference. The brother says:

(15) Men maatte jeg spørge Monsør-en om en ting?
 but might I ask monsieur-the about one thing
 Could I ask you about something?

Holberg, Ludvig (1731). Erasmus Montanus.

Lisbed, Rasmus' fiancé, calls him *du* when they are good friends but *I* when they quarrel, and the same does Rasmus in relation to Lisbed. The system available for people talking to each other, does in this case not only presuppose their membership of upper or lower class, but also the low degree of intimacy, and the usage not only mirror the actual relations, but is an attempt to change the ongoing relationship.

Perhaps the usage has not been exactly as pictured by the author in the play *Erasmus Montanus*. The play makes fun of the simple peasants in depicting them as believing that the earth is flat as a pancake. But in fact, peasants in Denmark in 1723 did not believe that the earth was flat, and the play is in this respect exaggerating its satire. Perhaps the absurdities of the usage of pronouns are exaggerated too.

A hundred years after Erasmus Montanus the deferential second person plural address form to a single person, *I-jer-jeres*, was replaced, after German model, by the third person plural pronoun to a single person: *De-Dem-Deres* (spelled with initial capital), and this unstable system (table 2) stayed the next hundreds of years.

In 1950 (when this author was a child) the pronominal system had settled among adults in a stable system of pure solidarity; status was not expressed in the use of pronouns: Foreigners were called *De* and close persons *du*.

Table 5. Second person pronouns singular

THE SOLIDARITY SYSTEM 1950		ADDRESSEE	
		SUPERIOR	INFERIOR
SPEAKER	SUPERIOR	<i>du</i>	
	INFERIOR		

'x'y' = remote\close.

In this system you started an acquaintance exchanging *De*. When you became more acquainted with each other, you could *drikke dus* (a ceremony where a couple arm in arm drank to testify that they henceforth would address each other *du*). It was the woman who could suggest to a man to do it, and the superior who could suggest it to the inferior, not vice versa. The status system

didn't disappear because the pronouns lost their class significance.

For children there was still a mixed system of solidarity in one dimension and adulthood in the other dimension. Children called foreign adults *De* and intimate adults *du*, but all children, foreign as well as family members, were called *du*.

Table 6. Second person pronouns singular

CHILDHOOD SYSTEM		ADDRESSEE	
		ADULT	CHILD
SPEAKER	ADULT	<i>du</i>	<i>du</i>
	CHILD	<i>De</i>	

'x'y' = remote/close.

In the 1970s also the second person pronominal system of solidarity broke down, and all people were addressed *du* by all people – like it is in English (table 7).

Table 7. Second person pronouns singular

PRESENT SYSTEM	ADDRESSEE
SPEAKER	<i>du</i>

Like in the Soviet Union, where all comrades were equal, but some comrades were more equal than others, it was still possible to keep the distance between the classes and distinguish between friends and foreigners, but not by use of pronouns. It could linguistically be done by asymmetric exchange of other forms of address: first name, surname, pet name, nickname, *hr.* (*Mr.*), *fru* (*Mrs.*) and *frk.* (*Miss*), first name + surname, kinship title (e.g. *mother*), occupational title (e.g. *professor*), title + first name, title + surname, title + first name + surname etc.

The queen ought, according to the etiquette, to be addressed as *Deres Majestæt* (lit: *Their majesty* meaning 'Your Majesty'), and later in the utterance *De-Dem-Deres*. To a young man who had forgotten and called the queen *du*, she answered: *As far as I remember we didn't go to school together.*

As long back as we have evidence of it, the pragmatic use of second person pronouns has reflected the interpersonal relations between the interlocutors, presupposed semantic information about them, and signaled how the speaker wanted them to be. Four different systems can be identified:

1. A status norm, table 3: Superiors were addressed *I*, and inferiors *du*, by both superiors and

inferiors.

2. A mixed norm, table 4: Both the status system and the intimacy system could be chosen depending on the situation, and second person pronouns could be avoided by use of third person pronouns denoting a second person addressee.

3. A solidarity system, table 5: All foreigners are called *De*, all close intimates are called *du*.

4. Children's system, table 6: Foreign adults are called *De*, close adults *du*, and all children *du*.

5. Present system, table 7: No distinctions between second person pronouns, all people (except for the queen) are always called *du*.

6. Some people in modern society use and ask for a return to the mixed system 2.

4. Third person generic pronouns

During the 20th century the third person pronouns *han (he)* - *ham (him)* - *hans (his)* and *hun (she)* - *hende (her)* - *hendes (hers)* have been much discussed when used with generic reference in laws, definitions, and scientific descriptions.

Generally, pronouns have the function of anaphoric reference to an entity mentioned earlier in the discourse, and the relevant antecedent word is in Danish identified by congruence in grammatical gender:

(16) Vasen^{common} ramte vinduet^{neuter} og det^{neuter} gik i stykker
vase-the hit window-the and it^{the window} broke
The vase hit the window and the window broke

(17) Vasen^{common} ramte vinduet^{neuter} og den^{common} gik i stykker
vase-the hit window-the and it^{the vase} broke
The vase hit the window and the vase broke

The neuter gender pronoun *det* in (16) refers to the neuter noun *vinduet*, while the common gender pronoun *den* in (17) refers to the common gender noun *vasen*.

If the talk is about humans (or pets or dolls) the third person anaphoric personal pronoun is not differentiated according to the grammatical gender of the antecedent word (because the grammatical distinction between masculine and feminine gender has disappeared), but to the biological sex of the person denoted by the antecedent, e.g.

(18) Frederik elskede Mary, og hun elskede også ham
Frederik loved Mary, and she loved too him
Frederik loved Mary, and she loved him too

In Old Danish nouns were of either masculine, feminine or neuter grammatical gender (as in German today), and the anaphoric pronouns were accordingly inflected in masculine, feminine or neuter. There was, however, no one-to-one correspondence between the grammatical gender of

the word, and the biological sex of the person referred to (in German the word *Mädchen* (*girl*) is neuter gender). So *jorden* (*earth-the*) was in Holberg's play referred to with *hun* (*she*) because the word at earlier and still remembered times was feminine gender. That is not the case today.

Today masculine and feminine grammatical gender are melted together to common gender, contrasted with neuter gender. The gender of the pronoun for things, matters and animals is still congruent with the gender of the antecedent noun:

(19) De så en^{common} hest, den^{common} sov
 they saw a horse, it slept

(20) De så et^{neuter} føl, det^{neuter} sov
 they saw a foal, it slept

The pronoun *den* refers to the common gender noun *hest* (*horse*), and the neuter pronoun *det* refers to the neuter noun *føl* (*foal*). But a distinction between male and female sex about persons has overruled grammatical gender:

(21) De så et^{neuter} pigebarn, hun sov
 They saw a girl, she slept

(22) De så en^{common} pige, hun sov
 They saw a girl, she slept

(23) De så en^{common} dreng, han sov
 They saw a boy, he slept

The system of third person pronouns is shown in table 8:

Table 8. Third person pronouns

PRESENT SYSTEM		THINGS, MATTERS, (WILD) ANIMALS		PERSONS, PETS, DOLLS, SHIPS	
		COMMON	NEUTER	MALE	FEMALE
SIN-GU -LAR	NOMINATIVE	<i>den</i>	<i>det</i>	<i>han</i>	<i>hun</i>
	OBLIQUE	<i>den</i>	<i>det</i>	<i>ham</i>	<i>hende</i>
	GENITIVE	<i>dens</i>	<i>dets</i>	<i>hans</i>	<i>hendes</i>
PLU-RA L	NOMINATIVE	<i>de</i>			
	OBLIQUE	<i>dem</i>			
	GENITIVE	<i>deres</i>			

This system has the consequence that the pronouns are not only purely grammatical devices that by means of congruence ensure the right anaphoric reference to previous words, but also words that presuppose the properties of the things in the world, namely the sex of the person talked about.

The system has been unproblematic for a long time, but in the 1970s there was a long debate about the generic use of third person pronouns in definitions, law texts and scientific descriptions. When anaphoric reference was made to a generic noun, such as *a teacher*, *any teacher*, where the sex was irrelevant, it was normal in Danish (as in other languages) – presumably in order to be short – to use *han* (he) as the anaphoric pronoun referring to the aforementioned generic person independently of his or her sex, meaning ‘he or she’. In Danish laws no woman is mentioned as *she* (except midwives and prostitutes) because the generic *he* normally was used in the law about generic persons. It gives very funny results in the Danish law about marriage (literally translated):

(24) § 24. Et ægteskab omstødes endvidere efter påstand af den ene ægtefælle:

1) hvis han ved ægteskabets indgåelse befandt sig i en tilstand, som udelukker evnen til at handle fornuftsmæssigt,

2) hvis han blev tvunget til at indgå ægteskab,

§ 24. A marriage is annulled after a claim of one of the spouses:

1) if he upon marriage was in a condition that excludes the ability to act reasonably

2) if he was forced to marry (...)

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It is hard from this formulation not to understand that *one of the spouses* is referring to the male spouse, and that only men can give consent to marriage not being aware of it because they are under the influence of alcohol, and that it is the female spouse who normally forces the male spouse to marriage.

It is in practice possible to change the usage in the law text; *he* can be changed to plural *they*, to *the other spouse*, *he or she*, or to *(person) concerned*. In § 24 it could have been done in the following way:

(25) Et ægteskab omstødes endvidere efter påstand hvis den ene ægtefælle ved ægteskabets indgåelse

1) befandt sig i en tilstand, som udelukker evnen til at handle fornuftsmæssigt,

2) eller blev tvunget til at indgå ægteskab,

A marriage is annulled furthermore if one of the spouses claims upon marriage

1) to have been in a condition that excludes the ability to act reasonably,

2) to have been forced to marry ...

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But when the law about marriage was passed, Parliament voted on a change of the pronouns in the text, and there was not a majority for such a change.

Some writers have tackled the problem by using *she* as the generic third person pronoun; it is very striking when you read it but does not solve the problem of false presuppositions. Yet other writers have chosen in generic contexts more balanced to use *she* every second time.

It has been suggested to introduce a new sex neutral pronoun to replace *han* (*he*) and *hun* (*she*), namely *høn* as a new half-way word between *han* and *hun*, in English something like (*s*)*he*. But *høn* has never spread, and generic *han* has not disappeared from law texts although nowadays less frequent than earlier. One of the unsolved problems with the proposal is how to inflect the word in oblique case and genitive. One obvious possibility: *høn-høm-høns* is quite ridiculous because *høm* is an onomapoeic ‘cough’, *hømhøm* means ‘shit’, and *høns* means ‘chickens’.

Table 9. Third person generic pronoun

SEX SYSTEM		MALE	FEMALE
SPECIFIC		<i>han, ham, hans</i>	<i>hun, hende, hendes</i>
GENERIC	TRADITIONAL	<i>han, ham, hans</i>	
	PROPOSAL	<i>høn, høm, høns</i>	

It is said that it has been used about specific individuals too, e. g. in kindergartens, when the sex of the child was not relevant, but it has not gained ground.

According to the proponents of sex neutral generic pronouns the generic *he* is problematic because this usage of *he* probably has great influence on the way language users think about people in general. It isn't easy to study what is going on in people's mind when they use language, but there is some evidence that generic pronouns influence our thoughts about the world.

Ask a group of people to make a drawing of 'a worker', 'a teacher' and 'a social worker'. Interestingly, most people make a drawing where it is easy to see the sex of the person drawn although this is not necessary. In a study (Togebly 1992) 49 percent of the persons drawn were men, 27 percent women, and 25 percent unisex although there are more female teachers and social workers than male in real life and more male workers than female; 69 percent of the persons drawn by men were men, 25 percent women and 6 percent unisex; 49 percent of the persons drawn by women were men, 28 percent women, and 32 percent unisex. It looks like people think that most generic people are male.

The effect of the generic *he* is highlighted very elegantly by the following story:

- (26) One dark night a father and his son crashed their car into a tree; the father died on the spot, but the son was brought seriously injured to the hospital, where the surgeon and all the operating room nurses were already prepared for an operation. But when the boy was brought into the operating room and the blanket was removed from his face, the surgeon exclaimed: Oh God, my son.

Many people (who have not heard the story before) cannot figure out how the boy can be the son of the surgeon, because they have not imagined that the surgeon is a woman.

Here is another test: Who is the person saying: *But he has nothing on?* If you say that it is the little boy in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The emperor's new clothes* you have committed the same mistake; in the original text it is *the little child* who has the lines, and it could just as well be a little girl.

The generic *han* is a problem if you metaphorically look at consciousness in relation to language as a bird in the cage; in a way your mind is captured in the vocabulary of language like a bird in a cage. According to this idea language is the lattice of our thoughts. You can only use the concepts that are offered to you in words of language, and you cannot express feelings and sentiments for which you have no words.

If you take one single word, that is simply not correct, because you can learn or invent a word if you need it, and that is what is done in art and science. One word is just one little bar in the cage, it cannot prevent your thought from wandering, but you must see that the bars are connected, you shall see the whole cage. Every single word represents a classification of reality, and together all the words in the vocabulary form an ideology, by means of which values, possibilities, and power are distributed among the language users in the society (Sjørup 1985).

The ideology of our language is characterized by apartheid and monopoly (Dahlerup 1973). There is a strong apartheid between the properties and values attributed to women and men, and men have the monopoly of being normal. In the Danish vocabulary we have *formænd* (*chair-men*), *arbejdsmænd* (*work-men*) and *folketingsmænd* (*parliament-men*), but not the corresponding *-kvinder* (*-women*). Of the opposite type there are only two important ones: *sygeplejer-ske* (*nurse-female*), is distinguished from the word without the female indicating derivative *-ske*, *sygeplejer* which denotes persons with another and inferior job at a hospital. The word *jordmor* (*midwife*, lit: *earth-mother*), has according to the etymological dictionary, Katlev 2000 the meaning: 'the woman who takes the baby from the earth and hands it to the father'.

This usage became a problem in Denmark when it was decided by law that it was illegal to use sexist terminology in job advertising. It resulted in advertisements like *Arbejdsdreng m/k* (*work-boy m/f*) meaning *boy male or female*. It was impossible to invent a new word like *arbejdsbarn* (*workchild*), but it was also ridiculous to talk about a *boy m/f*. It was not a success, and although the law is still in force no one is prosecuted for not obeying it.

When there are two names for a job, or category of person, the female word is often pejorative while the male counterpart is not: *lærer* (*teacher*) is the normal word, *lærerinde* (*teacher-female*) is a teacher of small children in the first classes and with lower education; a man

is called *hr.* (*Mr.*), but a woman was either addressed *frk.* (*Miss*) or *fru* (*Mrs.*); you need not know whether a man is married or not. The word *ungkarl* (litt: *young chap* meaning *bachelor*) denotes an attractive man, while a *pebermø* (litt: *pepper maiden* meaning *spinster*) is too old. In the world of language (vocabulary) there is a strong apartheid between the domain of women, where the negative values and a small set of often stigmatized persons belong, and the domain of men, inhabited by all the good, brave, and normal people. Every time when generic job holders (except midwives and prostitutes) were referred to with the pronoun *han*, it enforced the apartheid system.

In generic texts it is so to speak the language system that forces the language users to choose either *han* or *hun*, although sex has no relevance, and in this way reinforces the apartheid ideology of the patriarchal society.

5. Third person specific pronouns

In the 21st century another debate is going on, especially in LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender etc.) communities. Here nonbinary or genderqueer persons (who identify as being a gender other than exclusively male or exclusively female) have demanded that they as single specific persons by others should be referred to, not with the pronouns *han* or *hun*, but with some other pronoun. Many forms have been proposed: *den* (*it*), *de* (*they*), *han/hun* (*he/she*) or *hen* (a form inspired via Swedish from Finnish, where there is only one pronoun: *hän* for ‘he or she’). None of them have gained ground yet, but *de* (*they*) seems under influence from English to be pervasive (Miltersen 2018).

The new pronoun, whatever it may be, is not intended to mean ‘male or female’, but rather ‘a category that is neither male nor female’. The pronoun does not refer to biological sex of the persons talked about, but rather to their social and psychological gender identities.

Table 10. Third person specific pronouns

GENDER SYSTEM	MALE	FEMALE	NON-BINARY
SPECIFIC	<i>han</i>	<i>hun</i>	<i>de, den, hen</i>

Such pronouns as *den, de, hen* are much discussed and called for by members of the LGBT+ communities but are rarely used by people outside these communities. There are two problems. The first one is that you in many cases don’t know the gender identity of a person when you talk about them, let alone know by which third person pronominal form they prefer to be referred to. In an art exhibition catalogue where the artists are introduced, it is necessary after their name to indicate which propoun they prefer about themselves:

(26) Paneha Abareshi (de/dem) er canadisk-amerikansk, født 1999. De bor og arbejder i

Arozona.

Paneha Abareshi (they/them) is Canadian-American, born 1999. They live and work in Arozona.

Kaaring, Liza 2025. Anden krop. Fuglsang Kunstmuseum.

(27) Lydia Pettit (hun/hende) er amerikansk, født 1991. Hun bor og arbejder i London.

Lydia Pettit (she/her) is American, born 1991. She lives and works in London.

In (26) it is not clear whom the pronoun *de (they)* refers to, if it is not indicated that it is what the person mentioned wants to be called.

When you while talking to a second person talk about a third person, you must choose a level of specificity which your second person addressee would have chosen about that third person. If you know the American philosopher John Searle well, and you call him first name, you can't refer to him as *John* when you talk to people who don't know him that well; you have to say (as I did some lines ago): *the American philosopher John Searle*. That means that you can only use *de (they)* if both you and your addressees know the gender identity of the third person you talk about, and that is seldom the case when you talk about third persons, and you are not a member of the same Facebook forum for LGBT+ persons.

Summing up the concept of sex or gender has played very different roles in the development of Danish Language, from Indo-European, over Old Norse and the official Danish grammar of the 20th century, to contemporary struggle for sex equality and gender identity. Five stages of the use and rhetoric of third person pronouns can be found in the documented history of Danish language.

1. Semantic function. In reconstructed Indo-European grammatical gender seems to have been a sort of an inflection; the three genders have been developed from the small morphemes that were added to nouns indicating respectively 'active', 'collective' and 'resultative'. In Indo-European it became a classification of nouns according to their final consonant *-s*, *-h* or *-m*. The word *himás* was masculine and meant 'coldness', *himã* feminine 'winter', and *himam* neuter 'snow' (Nielsen 1968, p 40). In Latin remnants of the system are the facts that *hiems* (winter) is feminine, and that words with final *-us* are masculine, and words with final *-a* are feminine.

2. Grammatical function. In Old Danish grammatical gender was a purely grammatical device that through congruence ensured anaphoric reference to the right antecedent word belonging to one of three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine or neuter. Later the masculine and feminine gender melted together to common gender, but the pronouns were still in congruence with an antecedent noun.

3. Grammatical and semantic function. The present system, table 8, in which grammatical genders have both grammatical and semantic functions: they ensure the right anaphoric reference and presuppose information about the biological sex of the person talked about.

4. Textual function. A system, table 9, in which the pronouns vary depending on the specificity of

the text: male and female about specific persons, neutral (either male or female) about generic persons.

5. Social function. A system, table 10, in which the pronouns are weapons in the struggle to create a new social and psychological gender identity for the person referred to.

It is remarkable that pronouns, that are one of the most frequent words in the language, have undergone dramatic changes in the meaning and pragmatic use of existing word forms in hundreds of years caused by changes of the relations between social groups in the society, between economic classes, men and women, adults and children, but that the pronominal forms and the whole system of pronominal forms haven't changed much until the last 20 years, and it seems impossible deliberately to introduce one single new pronoun for non-binary persons.

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