

The Pragmatic Dimension of Personal Pronouns

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Abstract:

This study explores the pragmatic dimension of personal pronouns in Azerbaijani and English, focusing on how these linguistic units encode social status, politeness, inclusion, and speaker identity. Traditionally considered mere grammatical markers, pronouns are shown here to be crucial indicators of social relationships and communicative intent. Drawing on Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), the research analyzes how pronoun choice affects illocutionary and perlocutionary acts within discourse. Comparative examples from the Azerbaijani National Corpus and the British National Corpus illustrate that Azerbaijani explicitly encodes respect and social distance through morphological distinctions such as *sən* (informal “you”) and *siz* (formal “you”), while English relies on syntactic and lexical politeness strategies. The study further discusses the inclusive and exclusive uses of *biz* (“we”) in Azerbaijani, highlighting how speakers use pronouns to manage in-group and out-group relations. Findings reveal that while English achieves pragmatic variation indirectly through modal expressions and context, Azerbaijani does so directly through its pronominal system. This demonstrates that personal pronouns function as powerful pragmatic tools reflecting cultural values, politeness norms, and communicative strategies. The article contributes to the broader understanding of linguistic pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and intercultural communication.

Keywords: *pragmatics, personal pronouns, politeness, social deixis, Speech Act Theory, Azerbaijani, English, discourse analysis*

Introduction

In modern linguistics, **pragmatics** has emerged as a primary field for studying the social and functional aspects of language. One area of interest is personal pronouns. Traditionally, pronouns are viewed as grammatical markers (indicating person, number, gender), but a pragmatic perspective reveals that they are powerful tools for expressing relationships between participants in communication. For instance, in Azerbaijani the choice between “**sən**” (you – informal) and “**siz**” (you – formal) is both a grammatical and a social marker: it encodes the degree of respect, familiarity, or social distance between speaker and listener. Such nuances indicate that personal pronouns carry meaning far beyond simple reference; they help negotiate social status and emotional attitude at the linguistic level.

Key aspects of the present study include:

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- **Relevance of the study:** There is a lack of comprehensive research on the pragmatic functions of personal pronouns in Azerbaijani. Given the expansion of modern forms of communication (e.g. official correspondence, media speech, online dialogue), it is timely to reassess how personal pronouns function as social markers in contemporary linguistic behavior.
- **Purpose of the research:** The aim of this study is to identify the **pragmatic dimensions** of personal pronouns in the Azerbaijani language, revealing how pronoun usage varies with social relationships, politeness norms, and communicative intentions. A secondary aim is to compare these findings with English to highlight cross-linguistic similarities and differences.
- **Research methods:** A mixed-method approach is employed, combining discourse analysis, pragmatic analysis, comparative linguistics, and sociolinguistic observation. Within the framework of **Speech Act Theory** (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), the illocutionary and perlocutionary functions of pronouns are examined – in other words, how pronoun choice contributes to the intended speech act and its effect on the listener. **Politeness Theory** (Levinson, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987) is used to analyze pronoun choices with respect to face-saving strategies and social distance. Additionally, a comparative corpus analysis (drawing on the Azerbaijani National Corpus and the British National Corpus) explores the frequency and contexts of pronoun use across different social settings in Azerbaijani and English.
- **Scientific novelty:** This research offers a systematic analysis of personal pronouns not only as grammatical elements but also as socio-functional devices. By examining Azerbaijani in comparison to English, the study uncovers how different pronominal systems encode social structure and cultural values. Notably, the analysis highlights pragmatic nuances of Azerbaijani pronouns with concrete discourse examples, marking the first comprehensive study of this kind. The Azerbaijani–English comparison also brings to light cross-cultural differences in pronoun usage that have not been widely documented before.

Pronouns and Social Context

Personal pronouns have a rich **pragmatic dimension** that reflects various social variables: the speaker’s and listener’s relative social status, age, gender, level of intimacy, and the communicative context. In other words, pronouns function as tools of social deixis – they encode the social relationship between interlocutors within the language itself. A choice of pronoun can deepen the meaning of an utterance by signaling formality, familiarity, or deference. For example, addressing someone as “*siz*” (formal “you”) in Azerbaijani immediately establishes a respectful distance, whereas “*sən*” (informal “you”) implies closeness or equal status. As noted in pragmatic studies, personal pronouns are **capable of conveying extralinguistic categories such as politeness, respect, intimacy, and solidarity**, all of which are social-pragmatic meanings^[1]. This means that beyond their grammatical role, pronouns actively participate in managing how speakers present themselves and relate to others in interaction.

Pronouns, Speech Acts, and Politeness Strategies

According to **Speech Act Theory**, every utterance has an illocutionary force (the intended meaning or act, such as requesting or asserting) and often a perlocutionary effect (its impact on the listener). Personal pronouns contribute significantly to the illocutionary force by expressing the speaker's stance and their relationship with the listener as part of the speech act. For instance, consider the request in Azerbaijani: "*Siz bu sənədi imzalayın,*" meaning "Please sign this document." Here, the pronoun "**siz**" is not just identifying the addressee; it also performs a polite request. The use of the formal pronoun mitigates the force of the imperative, conveying deference and formality. In contrast, using "*sən*" in the same request could either sound overly familiar or impolite in a formal context. Thus, pronoun selection is a key component of the illocutionary act – it helps the speaker perform the act (requesting, commanding, etc.) with the appropriate social tone.

In line with Brown and Levinson's **Politeness Theory**, pronoun choice is directly tied to face-saving strategies and the management of social distance. Pronouns can indicate whether a speaker is employing positive politeness (showing closeness and solidarity) or negative politeness (showing respect and deference to the addressee's desire not to be imposed upon). In Azerbaijani, "*sən*" usually signals intimacy or equal footing (a positive-politeness approach when used among friends or family), whereas "*siz*" is a negative-politeness strategy to maintain formality and respect[2]. Speakers switch between these forms depending on context: for example, one might use "*sən*" with close friends (to emphasize camaraderie and minimize distance) but switch to "*siz*" when addressing a stranger, an elder, or in a professional setting to honor the addressee's social face. This pragmatic shifting of pronouns allows speakers to perform **facework** – the ongoing work of managing one's own and others' face (self-esteem and autonomy) in conversation.

It is noteworthy that what pronouns accomplish in Azerbaijani through morphology (i.e. using different pronoun forms) is often achieved in English through other politeness strategies. English lacks a T/V distinction (the equivalent of informal vs. formal "you"), so **all** second-person address uses "you." To compensate, English speakers rely on tone, phrasing, and additional words to convey respect or familiarity. For example, an English speaker might say "*Could you please help me with this?*" – the addition of "could" and "please," along with a polite intonation, fulfills a similar polite illocutionary function as the use of "*siz*" in Azerbaijani "*Siz mənə kömək edə bilərsinizmi?*" ("Could you help me?"). In both cases, the pragmatic effect is a respectful request, but the **linguistic means** differ: Azerbaijani encodes politeness in the pronoun itself, while English uses **indirectness and politeness markers** in the surrounding language to achieve the same end.

Inclusive vs. Exclusive "We"

Pragmatic nuances of pronouns are also evident in the use of the first-person plural "**biz**" (we) in Azerbaijani. This pronoun can have two different inclusivity scopes, which the speaker chooses deliberately to shape the social relationship:

- **Inclusive "we":** "*Biz sabah görüşəcəyik*" – literally "We will meet tomorrow" – in context can mean "*You and I will meet tomorrow.*" Here, "**biz**" includes both the speaker and the listener. Using inclusive "we" can create a sense of togetherness or shared intent. It minimizes distance by linguistically uniting the speaker and listener in the same group or action.

- **Exclusive “we”:** *“Biz qərara gəldik”* – “We have decided” – might be said by a speaker to refer to themselves and some third party (e.g., their team or superiors), **excluding** the listener. In this case, **“biz”** does not include the person being spoken to. Exclusive “we” can serve to establish a boundary or even a subtle hierarchy (e.g. indicating that a decision was made by an authority group that the listener is not part of).

This inclusive/exclusive distinction in “we” reflects the speaker’s pragmatic intentions. Choosing one or the other can either **draw the listener in** as part of an in-group or **distance the listener** by placing them outside the decision-making group. The fact that the same pronoun form carries these two interpretations underscores how context and shared knowledge are crucial in pragmatics: speakers rely on context to clarify whether “we” is meant to foster solidarity or to delineate roles. While English does not have separate words for inclusive vs. exclusive “we,” the concept can be conveyed implicitly (for instance, “we (all of us here)” vs. “we (my organization)”). The deliberate use of “we” in political or organizational speech often mirrors this strategy in English as well, as the next section discusses.

Pronouns in Discourse and Identity

Beyond sentence-level interactions, personal pronouns play a pivotal role in **discourse** – especially in constructing social identities and conveying ideology. Discourse analysis shows that pronouns can index group membership and attitude. For example, in political speeches and media statements, speakers often use **“we”** to signal unity or collective identity. Phrases like *“Biz güclü dövlət quracağıq”* (“We will build a strong state”) allow the speaker (e.g., a political leader) to align themselves with the people, creating an inclusive sense of *“we the nation.”* This use of **“biz”** fosters collective solidarity and implies shared responsibility for future actions or goals. In contrast, the pronoun **“onlar”** (“they”) might be used to delineate an out-group or opposition. A sentence such as *“Onlar bizim inkişafımıza mane olurlar”* (“They hinder our development”) uses *“onlar”* to otherize and distance a certain group, attributing negative actions to them. Pragmatically, this **we vs. they** dichotomy in discourse is a powerful strategy: *“we”* creates camaraderie and shared purpose, while *“they”* can assign blame or highlight conflict. These pronoun choices subtly encode relationships between social groups and can influence how audiences align themselves (with *“us”* against *“them”*).

Pronouns in discourse also determine the speaker’s **stance and level of responsibility**. The use of **“I”** (Azerbaijani *“mən”*) versus **“we”** can signal whether the speaker is expressing a personal opinion or representing a group consensus. *“Mən”* emphasizes individual agency and accountability (“I think...”, “I will...”), which can be powerful in personal testimony or when a speaker wants to take direct responsibility. On the other hand, *“biz”* distributes responsibility across the group (“We believe...”, “We have decided...”), which can either imply strength in numbers or, conversely, dilute personal responsibility. In organizational communication or diplomatic language, opting for *“we”* instead of *“I”* is a common pragmatic strategy to present a united front or to speak on behalf of an institution.

In everyday conversation, these distinctions manifest in simpler ways as well. Consider the question “Where are you going?” in Azerbaijani: one could ask *“Sən hara gedirsən?”* or *“Siz hara gedirsiniz?”* Both sentences seek the same information, but the pronoun choice (*sən* vs. *siz*) conveys a **different tone**

and relationship. The first version is used among friends, family, or peers (informal, signaling closeness), whereas the second is appropriate for a stranger, elder, or superior (formal, signaling respect). Thus, even a straightforward inquiry carries an additional layer of meaning delivered by the pronoun. The **communicative intent** (to ask a question) remains constant, but the **pragmatic framing** differs with social context. Such examples reinforce that personal pronouns function as **regulators of social interaction**: by simply choosing one pronoun over another, speakers navigate cultural norms of politeness and familiarity in real time.

Cross-Linguistic Differences: Azerbaijani vs. English

A comparative look at Azerbaijani and English highlights how languages encode politeness and social relations through pronouns in different ways. Azerbaijani, like many languages (such as French, Russian, or Japanese), has explicit **politeness distinctions in pronouns**. The **second-person singular** is split between an informal form (*sən*) and a formal form (*siz*), as discussed. This **T–V distinction** (from the Latin *tu* vs. *vos*) allows the speaker to directly encode the level of respect or familiarity in the pronoun itself. English, by contrast, has no such distinction in modern usage – “**you**” serves as the pronoun for any addressee, regardless of the social relationship. Historically, English once had “*thou*” (informal) and “*you*” (formal/plural) distinctions, but these faded by the 18th century[3][4]. Today, English relies on *other linguistic strategies* to convey formality or informality. These strategies include using polite modal verbs (“*could you, would you...*”), honorific titles or names (e.g. “Sir,” “Madam,” or Mr./Dr. + surname), and polite expressions (“*please, “excuse me,*” etc.), as well as an appropriate tone of voice.

The consequence of this structural difference is that Azerbaijani speakers make **pragmatic choices at the level of pronoun morphology**, whereas English speakers make them at the level of syntax or word choice. In Azerbaijani, failing to use “*siz*” when the situation calls for it can be perceived as a social faux pas or an act of disrespect. In English, since there is no alternate pronoun, inappropriate familiarity or respect is signaled through other missteps (such as using first names too soon, or speaking in an overly direct manner). Essentially, **Azerbaijani encodes respect and social distance overtly**, while **English tends to do so indirectly**. For example, an Azerbaijani speaker might say “*Siz bu məsələni izah edə bilərsinizmi?*” – literally “Can you explain this issue?” – where “*siz*” and the polite verb form signal respect. An English speaker in a similar formal scenario would achieve the same politeness effect with a sentence like “*Could you please explain this issue?*” (no special pronoun, but using a polite question form with *could* and *please*). Both utterances fulfill the pragmatic goal of showing deference, but through different linguistic means[5].

Cultural values also influence pronominal usage in each language. Azerbaijani culture, often described as **collectivist**, places a strong emphasis on respect for elders, family hierarchy, and group harmony. The language mirrors these values: the respectful “*siz*” form and the inclusive “*biz*” highlight community, togetherness, and acknowledgment of social roles. By contrast, cultures like those of the United Kingdom and the United States are often characterized as more **individualist**, valuing directness and individual identity. English reflects this by heavily using “I” statements and lacking obligatory markers of formality in everyday address. Interestingly, linguistic research suggests that in many traditionally collectivist societies, even the grammar can evolve to downplay the individual – for

instance, some collectivist languages are “**pronoun-dropping**”, allowing speakers to omit the subject pronoun “I” because it is understood in context. This omission, in effect, *de-emphasizes the individual self* in speech[5]. Azerbaijani itself is a pro-drop language (the verb endings often indicate the subject, so pronouns can be left out), which aligns with this tendency. In English, pronoun use is mandatory, and saying “I” is necessary even when context is clear – a feature that dovetails with a cultural tilt towards asserting one’s individual presence.

Overall, the **pragmatic load** carried by pronouns is significant in both languages, but it manifests differently. Azerbaijani’s pronominal system explicitly marks nuances of respect and number (singular/plural) with separate forms, whereas English relies on uniform pronouns combined with **contextual and lexical cues**. Both languages use pronouns as a means of defining the self and the other in interaction, performing what could be called *self-presentation* and *other-presentation* functions. In Azerbaijani, this may be immediately apparent through word choice (pronoun form), while in English it emerges through subtle shifts in phrasing and context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, personal pronouns are not merely grammatical placeholders or simple reference tools – they are **dynamic regulators of social and communicative relations**. This study has shown that in Azerbaijani, the choice of a personal pronoun inherently reflects social relationships, politeness norms, and even cultural values. By saying “*sən*” versus “*siz*,” a speaker indicates how they perceive the relationship (close or distant, informal or formal) and aligns with cultural expectations of respect. Similarly, choosing “*mən*” (I) or “*biz*” (we) allows speakers to craft a personal or collective identity in discourse, thereby adjusting the level of personal responsibility or solidarity expressed. In English, although the pronoun forms themselves do not change with context, pronouns still play a crucial pragmatic role. English speakers achieve the same ends – marking politeness, formality, or group identity – through context, tone, and additional wording rather than morphological changes. Thus, whether directly or indirectly, pronouns in both languages perform the essential function of defining the **relationship between speaker and listener** within an utterance.

The findings underscore that personal pronouns bridge **language and social behavior**. What might appear to be a small grammatical choice actually encodes a wealth of information about the social context and the speaker’s communicative intentions. This research’s novelty lies in its comparative approach: by systematically analyzing Azerbaijani pronouns through a pragmatic lens and juxtaposing them with English usage, we have identified clear links between pronominal forms and cultural communication patterns. Azerbaijani explicitly encodes distinctions of respect and collectivity in pronouns, whereas English relies on pragmatic strategies to convey similar meanings. These insights have practical implications for fields like sociolinguistics (understanding language in its social context), language education (teaching appropriate pronoun use and politeness strategies to learners), and translation studies (accurately conveying the tone of pronouns between languages).

In summary, personal pronouns should be viewed as **pragmatic instruments** as much as grammatical ones. They shape how we project ourselves (our identity, authority, solidarity) and how we acknowledge others in interaction. Future research could build on this study by exploring emotional

and **psychopragmatic** aspects of pronoun use (for example, how pronoun choice might convey empathy or sarcasm), as well as examining pronoun usage in emerging communication mediums like social media. As languages evolve and modes of communication expand, the pragmatic dimension of pronouns will remain a key factor in how we navigate social relationships through language.

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