

The Nature of Pronouns

IN THE STILL OPEN DEBATE on the nature of pronouns, it is usual to consider these linguistic forms as constituting a class both formal and functional, in the manner of nominal or verbal forms, for example. Now all languages possess pronouns, and in all of them they are defined as referring to the same categories of expression (personal pronouns, demonstratives, etc.). The universality of these forms and these notions leads to the thought that the problem of pronouns is both a problem of language in general and a problem of individual languages; or better, that it is a problem of individual languages only because it is primarily a problem of language in general. It is as a phenomenon of language that we pose the problem here, in order to show that pronouns do not constitute a unitary class but are of different types depending on the mode of language of which they are the signs. Some belong to the syntax of a language, others are characteristics of what we shall call "instances of discourse," that is, the discrete and always unique acts by which the language is actualized in speech by a speaker.

The situation of the personal pronouns should be considered first. It is not enough to distinguish them from the other pronouns by a denomination that separates them. It must be seen that the ordinary definition of the personal pronouns as containing the three terms, *I*, *you*, and *he*, simply destroys the notion of "person." "Person" belongs only to *I/you* and is lacking in *he*. This basic difference will be evident from an analysis of *I*.

Between *I* and a noun referring to a lexical notion, there are not only the greatly varying formal differences that the morphological and syntactic structure of particular languages imposes; there are also others that result from the very process of linguistic utterance and which are of a more general and more basic nature. The utterance containing *I* belongs to that level or type of language which Charles Morris calls pragmatic, which includes, with the signs, those who make use of them. A linguistic text of great length—a scientific treatise, for example—can be imagined in which *I* and *you* would not appear a single time; conversely, it would be difficult to conceive of a short spoken

text in which they were not employed. But the other signs of a language are distributed indifferently between these two types of texts. Besides this condition of use, which is itself distinctive, we shall call attention to a fundamental and moreover obvious property of *I* and *you* in the referential organization of linguistic signs. Each instance of use of a noun is referred to a fixed and "objective" notion, capable of remaining potential or of being actualized in a particular object and always identical with the mental image it awakens. But the instances of the use of *I* do not constitute a class of reference since there is no "object" definable as *I* to which these instances can refer in identical fashion. Each *I* has its own reference and corresponds each time to a unique being who is set up as such.

What then is the reality to which *I* or *you* refers? It is solely a "reality of discourse," and this is a very strange thing. *I* cannot be defined except in terms of "locution," not in terms of objects as a nominal sign is. *I* signifies "the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing *I*." This instance is unique by definition and has validity only in its uniqueness. If I perceive two successive instances of discourse containing *I*, uttered in the same voice, nothing guarantees to me that one of them is not a reported discourse, a quotation in which *I* could be imputed to another. It is thus necessary to stress this point: *I* can only be identified by the instance of discourse that contains it and by that alone. It has no value except in the instance in which it is produced. But in the same way it is also as an instance of form that *I* must be taken; the form of *I* has no linguistic existence except in the act of speaking in which it is uttered. There is thus a combined double instance in this process: the instance of *I* as referent and the instance of discourse containing *I* as the referee. The definition can now be stated precisely as: *I* is "the individual who utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *I*." Consequently, by introducing the situation of "address," we obtain a symmetrical definition for *you* as the "individual spoken to in the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *you*." These definitions refer to *I* and *you* as a category of language and are related to their position in language. We are not considering the specific forms of this category within given languages, and it matters little whether these forms must figure explicitly in the discourse or may remain implicit in it.

This constant and necessary reference to the instance of discourse constitutes the feature that unites to *I/you* a series of "indicators" which, from their form and their systematic capacity, belong to different classes, some being pronouns, others adverbs, and still others, adverbial locutions.

The demonstratives, *this*, etc., are such indicators inasmuch as their organization correlates with that of the indicators of person, as in Lat.

hic/iste. Here there is a new and distinctive feature in this series: it is the identification of the object by an indicator of ostension concomitant with the instance of discourse containing the indicator of person. By simultaneous ostension, *this* will be the object designated in the present instance of discourse and the reference implicit in the form (for example, *hic* as opposed to *iste*), which associates it with *I* and *you*. Outside this class, but on the same plane and associated in the same frame of reference, we find the adverbs *here* and *now*. Their relationship with *I* will be shown by defining them: *here* and *now* delimit the spatial and temporal instance coextensive and contemporary with the present instance of discourse containing *I*. This series is not limited to *here* and *now*; it is increased by a great number of simple or complex terms that proceed from the same relationship: *today*, *yesterday*, *tomorrow*, *in three days*, etc. It is pointless to define these terms and the demonstratives in general by deixis, as is generally done, unless one adds that the deixis is contemporary with the instance of discourse that carries the indicator of person; it is from this reference that the demonstrative takes its property of being unique and particular each time, which is the uniqueness of the instance of discourse to which it refers.

The essential thing, then, is the relation between the indicator (of person, time, place, object shown, etc.) and the *present* instance of discourse. For from the moment that one no longer refers, by the expression itself, to this relation of the indicator to the unique instance that manifests it, the language has recourse to a series of distinct terms that have a one-to-one correspondence with the first and which refer, not to the instance of discourse, but to "real" objects, to "historical" times and places. Hence correlations such as *I: he—here: there—now: then—today: the very day—yesterday: the day before—tomorrow: the day after—next week: the following week—three days ago: three days before*, etc. The language itself reveals the profound difference between these two planes.

The reference to the "speaker" implicit in this whole group of expressions has been treated too lightly and as being self-evident. We rob this reference of its inherent meaning if we do not see the feature by which it is distinguished from other linguistic signs. Yet it is a fact both original and fundamental that these "pronominal" forms do not refer to "reality" or to "objective" positions in space or time but to the utterance, unique each time, that contains them, and thus they reflect their proper use. The importance of their function will be measured by the nature of the problem they serve to solve, which is none other than that of intersubjective communication. Language has solved this problem by creating an ensemble of "empty" signs that are nonreferential with respect to "reality." These signs are always available and become "full" as soon as a speaker introduces them into each instance of his discourse,

Since they lack material reference, they cannot be misused; since they do not assert anything, they are not subject to the condition of truth and escape all denial. Their role is to provide the instrument of a conversion that one could call the conversion of language into discourse. It is by identifying himself as a unique person pronouncing *I* that each speaker sets himself up in turn as the "subject." The use thus has as a condition the situation of discourse and no other. If each speaker, in order to express the feeling he has of his irreducible subjectivity, made use of a distinct identifying signal (in the sense in which each radio transmitting station has its own call letters), there would be as many languages as individuals and communication would become absolutely impossible. Language wards off this danger by instituting a unique but mobile sign, *I*, which can be assumed by each speaker on the condition that he refers each time only to the instance of his own discourse. This sign is thus linked to the exercise of language and announces the speaker as speaker. It is this property that establishes the basis for individual discourse, in which each speaker takes over all the resources of language for his own behalf. Habit easily makes us unaware of this profound difference between language as a system of signs and language assumed into use by the individual. When the individual appropriates it, language is turned into instances of discourse, characterized by this system of internal references of which *I* is the key, and defining the individual by the particular linguistic construction he makes use of when he announces himself as the speaker. Thus the indicators *I* and *you* cannot exist as potentialities; they exist only insofar as they are actualized in the instance of discourse, in which, by each of their own instances, they mark the process of appropriation by the speaker.

The systematic nature of language causes the appropriation these indicators signal to appear in the instance of discourse in all the elements capable of "agreeing" formally, especially in the verb, by means of processes that vary according to the type of idiom. We must emphasize this point: the "verb form" is an inextricable part of the individual instance of discourse: it is always and necessarily actualized by the act of discourse and in dependence on that act. It cannot admit of any potential and "objective" form. If the verb is usually represented by its infinitive as the lexical entry in a number of languages, this is purely by convention; the infinitive in language is something completely different from the infinitive in the lexicographic metalanguage. All the variations in the verbal paradigm—aspect, tense, gender, person, etc.—result from that actualization and from that dependence with respect to the instance of discourse, especially the "tense" of the verb, which is always relative to the instance in which the verb form figures. A finite personal utterance is thus constituted on a double plane: it puts the denominative function of language into operation for references to the object, which

language establishes as distinctive lexical signs, and arranges these references to the object with the aid of self-referential indicators corresponding to each of the formal classes that the idiom recognizes.

But is this always true? If language, as it is exercised, is by necessity produced in discrete instances, does not this necessity oblige it to consist only of "personal" instances? We know empirically that this is not the case. There are utterances in discourse that escape the condition of person in spite of their individual nature; that is, they refer not to themselves but to an "objective" situation. This is the domain that we call the "third person."

The "third person" in fact represents the unmarked member of the correlation of person. That is why it is not a truism to affirm that the non-person is the only mode of utterance possible for the instances of discourse not meant to refer to themselves but to predicate the process of someone or something outside the instance itself, and this someone or something can always be provided with an objective reference.

Thus, in the formal class of pronouns, those said to be of the "third person" are, by their function and by their nature, completely different from *I* and *you*. As has long been seen, forms like *he*, *him*, *that*, etc. only serve as abbreviated substitutes (Pierre is sick; *he* has a "fever"); they replace or relay one or another of the material elements of the utterance. But this function is not attached only to pronouns; it can be served by elements of other classes—in French, on occasion by certain verbs ("cet enfant écrit maintenant mieux qu'il ne *faisait* l'année dernière" [similarly in English: that child writes better now than he *did* last year]). This is a function of syntactic "representation" which extends to terms taken from different "parts of speech" and which answers to a need for economy by replacing one segment of the utterance, or even an entire utterance, with a more manageable substitute. Hence the function of these substitutes has nothing in common with that of the indicators of person.

Certain languages show that the "third person" is indeed literally a "non-person."¹ To take just one example among many, here is how the possessive pronominal prefixes are presented in two series (something like inalienable and alienable) in Yuma (California): first person, *?-*, *?an^v-*; second person, *m-*, *man^v-*; third person, zero, *n^v*.² The personal reference is a zero reference outside the *I/you* relationship. In other languages (Indo-European chiefly) the regularity of the formal structure and a symmetry of secondary origin produce the impression of three coordinated persons. This is especially the case with modern languages with an obligatory pronoun in which *he* seems to be a member of a paradigm with three terms, on a par with *I* and *you*, or in the inflection of the present in Indo-European with *-mi*, *-si*, *-ti*. In fact, the symmetry is only formal. What must be considered distinctive of the "third

person" is its property of (1) combining with any object reference, (2) never being reflective of the instance of discourse, (3) admitting of a sometimes rather large number of pronominal or demonstrative variants, and (4) not being compatible with the paradigm of referential terms like *here*, *now*, etc.

Even a brief analysis of the forms that are imprecisely classed as pronominal leads thus to the recognition among them of classes of entirely different natures and, consequently, to the distinction between, on the one hand, language as a repertory of signs and a system for combining them and, on the other, language as an activity manifested in instances of discourse which are characterized as such by particular signs.

From *For Roman Jakobson*, Morris Halle, Horace G. Lunt, Hugh McLean, and Cornelis H. van Schooneveld, eds. (The Hague, 1956), pp. 34-37