Generic use of the second person pronoun in Danish – the spreading of a linguistic innovation

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Pronouns with generic reference in Danish

Variable:

Pronoun referring to a group of people not further defined (in some cases possibly anybody), i.e. not just the speaker, the addressee or some specific third party

Variants in present day Danish:

- "man" (one) standard Danish and Zealand dialects
- "du" (you) documented in Danish only from 1973 onwards
- "en" (one) primarily in Jutland dialects (and generally in non-subject function)
- "den" (it) primarily in Jutland dialects
- "vi" (we) primarily in Funen dialects

The variable “pronoun with generic reference” includes all Danish pronouns in contexts where they are used to refer to an undefined person or group of persons in general. That is, a pronoun which refers not only to the speaker, the addressee or some specific third party, but to a generalized person.

The primary reason for studying this variable is that there seems to be an ongoing change in the use of Danish pronouns. The change being that the second person singular pronoun du is increasingly used with generic reference, instead of the traditional generic pronoun man.

Man has been used as a generic pronoun in Danish since the Middle Ages, whereas an uncontrovertibly generic du is documented only from the 1970’ies.

The most frequent variants of the variable “pronoun with generic reference” in present day Danish are undoubtedly man and du; but Danish also has another generic pronoun, namely en (similarly to the English pronoun one), and both the third person singular pronoun den and the first person plural pronoun vi can be used with generic meaning, especially in dialects.

The pronouns en, den and vi are not included in the study so far. They will be included later, but we expect them to be very infrequent in the data - except when the generic pronouns do not function as grammatical subjects. In these contexts the pronoun en does play an important role. This is because the pronoun man can only function as grammatical subject, in other syntactic functions the pronoun is complemented by en.

Therefore, only pronouns functioning as grammatical subjects are included in the analysis presented today.
**man** with generic reference

*man* burde sætte nogle tiltag i værk for at # brænde

*you/one* ought-to launch some initiatives in doing in-order to # brand

dialekterne lidt bedre

"you ought to launch some initiatives in order to brand the dialects a little better"

I will now show you some excerpts from the LANCHART-corpus of *man* and *du* used with generic reference.

First *man*, which is very hard to use *without* generic reference. The subject *man* in this sentence refers to a not further defined group of persons which has the potential to “launch initiatives to brand the Danish dialects”. From the context presented here, it is not possible to infer whether the speaker sees herself as included in this group or not, but most often it is possible to infer that from the broader context in which the pronoun occurs.
This slide shows an example of *du* with generic reference. It is clear that the second person pronoun *du* in this excerpt does *not* refer to the addressee – at least not specifically, as the speaker is actually talking about her *own* experiences of the difficulties of getting a new supply of stain for her kitchen table.

In contexts where generic *du* is occurring, the speaker is very often changing between *du* and *man* when speaking about the same referent. I see this as a strong indication that *du* and *man* are semantically equivalent, at least as far as descriptive reference is concerned.
As already mentioned, the general impression in Denmark seems to be that generic *du* has gained ground in the recent decades, but the phenomenon has not been investigated empirically until the study I am presenting now. We have therefore chosen generic pronouns as one of the grammatical variables in the LANCHART-study of language change in Danish in the 20th century. In order to study the spread of this alleged innovative use we have chosen a sample of speakers which have been recorded during sociolinguistic interviews twice – the first time in the period 1986 to 1988 and the second time in the last two years. The speakers come from three locations in Denmark: the capital Copenhagen, Næstved in the southern part of Zealand and Odder in eastern Jutland, near the second largest city in Denmark, Århus. The study will soon be supplemented by samples of speakers from Vinderup in eastern Jutland as well as speakers from the younger generation in Copenhagen. This allows us to study the spread of generic *du* in the Danish speech community in relation to geography as well as gender, social class and age groups.

The results presented today, though, only includes *one* generation of speakers, 3 times 12 men and women from Odder, Næstved and Copenhagen, respectively.

They were all at the time of the first recording between 25 and 45 years, and at the time of the second recording between 45 and 65 years.
Pronouns with generic reference

Hypothesis:

- The *du/man* ratio changes from the first to the second recording of the informants, with *du* gaining ground at the expense of *man*.

- The share of *du* is highest in the Copenhagen (and Næstved) data, as the change is likely to originate in the metropolitan area, and in the speech of the younger informants.

To all appearances, the tendency to use *du* with generic reference has been increasing in Danish; therefore our main hypothesis is that the *du/man* ratio changes from the first to the second recording of the informants, with *du* gaining ground at the expense of *man*.

Secondly, we expect the share of *du* to be highest in the Copenhagen data, as the change is likely to originate in the metropolitan area.

This is one of the main hypotheses in the LANCHART-project, which we call the *standardization model*. It holds that linguistic changes in 20th century Danish spreads from the norm centre, which is the Copenhagen area, and outwards to the rest of the speech community. As Næstved is more closely connected to this centre than Odder, we expect the share of *du* to be higher in Næstved than in Odder.

Actually, this ongoing change in the use of the second person pronoun in Danish seems to be parallel to recent developments in other languages including Canadian French, which has been documented by Laberge & Sankoff already in 1980.

It seems to be a cross-linguistic tendency, arguably driven by the influence from English.
Functional factors: Reference

The pronouns are categorized in four categories according to their type of (generic) reference.

**Hypothesis:**

\[ du \] is dispreferred when the addressee is *not* included in the reference of the generic pronoun, because it retains some of the “second person meaning”

A small number of functional factors have been included in the study in order to examine the spread of generic *du* not only in relation to speaker variables but also in relation to pragmatic and syntactic contexts. In this paper, I only include the two factors which has turned out to be the most influential as regards the choice of *du* versus *man*.

The first is the *type* of generic reference, and by reference I mean *descriptive* reference, that is the *extension* of the pronoun as pragmatically implicated by the actual context in which the pronoun is used. The pronouns in the corpus have been categorized in four categories according to their type of generic reference. I will show examples of the four types in a moment.

The hypothesis is that *du* is *dis*-preferred when the addressee is *not* included in the reference of the generic pronoun; the reason being that *du* retains some of the “second person meaning”, *also* when used generically.
Reference

Everybody (including both speaker and addressee)

du kender godt det # at hvis man er glad for den man
you know well this # that if you/one is happy with the-one you/one
har # så er man altid ked af at de skal skifte
have # then is you/one allways sorry of that they shall change

"you know what it’s like if you’re happy with the one [your children’s
teacher] you have # you’ll always be sorry that they [your children] have
to change"

In the first type of use the pronoun refers to a broad group of people not
further defined but which includes both speaker and addressee.
Reference

A group of people including the speaker but not the addressee

"well we have a big sports centre out there with all kinds of activities and there are of course many other activities you can enrol in"

In the second type of use, the reference includes the speaker but NOT the addressee. That is the speaker is generalizing over experiences and phenomena peculiar to herself and a group of people like her, but unlike the addressee. For example a group of people local to the area where the speaker lives. This is the most frequent use of generic pronouns in the corpus.
Reference

A group of people including the addressee but not the speaker

men du sagde du gik i skole i Saksild # til at starte med og # but you said you went in school in Saksild # to to begin with and #

var det så efter syvende klasse man skulle ind til Odder eller hvad was it then after seventh grade you/one should in to Odder or what

"but you said that you went to school in Saksild # in the beginning and # was it then after the seventh grade that you had to go to Odder"

In the third, relatively infrequent type of use, the speaker is NOT included in the reference. This typically occurs in questions.
Reference

A group of people including neither the speaker nor the addressee:

men er der ikke nogen steder man er begyndt at lave parkometer but is there not some places you/one is begun to do parking-meters
og sådan noget
and such something

“but aren’t there some places where they’ve begun putting up parking meters and things like that”

Finally, generic pronouns are used in situations where neither the speaker nor the addressee are included in the reference.
The results support the hypothesis that *du* is dis-preferred when the specific addressee is not included in the reference, as the category “speaker but not addressee” has a statistically lower share of *du* than the category “speaker AND addressee”. The shares of *du* in the two categories are 18 and 23 %, respectively.

But the results also show that speakers actually very often use generic *du* also in situations where the addressee is not included in the reference. The category “speaker but not addressee” is actually the most frequent type of reference for generic *du* – as it is for *man*. In other words: The speakers do not seem to have any problems using *du* even though the reference of the pronoun doesn’t include the addressee.

As can be seen from the diagram, *du* is represented in all the categories of reference indicating that the meaning potential of *du* in present day Danish is the same as that of *man* - as regards generic reference.

The diagram also shows that in the cases where the reference of the generic pronoun includes *neither* the speaker nor the addressee, the share of *du* is relatively low.

The reason probably is that there is a special possibility of use of *man* which *du* hasn’t acquired and this use is included in the category even though it is actually debatable whether this use is generic at all.
Reference

A group of people including *neither* the speaker nor the addressee:

men er der ikke nogen steder *man* er begyndt at lave parkometer
but is there not some places you/one is begun to do parking-meters
og sådan noget
and such something

"but aren’t there some places where they’ve begun putting up parking meters and things like that”

This slide shows an example of this use of *man*.
In the sentence “men er der ikke nogen steder man er begyndt at lave parkometer og sådan noget” the pronoun refers to a group of persons which may be completely specific but the precise identity of which is unknown to the speaker.
My native speaker intuition tells me, that *du* can’t be used instead of *man* in this context. Here, *man* is used as an indefinite rather than generic pronoun, and the Danish *man* may be described as *polysemic* with two rather discrete meaning variants, one of which *du* has acquired (namely the generic one), the other not.
Functional factors: Clause types

Hypothesis:

A conditional construction is a favorable environment for du because the risk of the addressee misinterpreting the pronoun as referring to her is minimized.

Definition of conditional construction:
a clause complex in which a clause (the protasis) specifies hypothetical, general or uncertain circumstances on which the actualization of another clause (the apodosis) is asserted to depend.

According to Laberge & Sankoff “implicative constructions” are in themselves indicators of generality. Because of their “hypothetical nature” they work to diminish the possibility of ambiguity with the second person referent when French tu (or vous) is used as generic pronoun, thus favouring the use of tu/vous instead of on.

This applies to Canadian French, but an obvious hypothesis is that this is also the case in Danish: A conditional construction is a favourable environment for du because the risk of the addressee misinterpreting the pronoun as referring to her is minimized.

The generic pronouns occurring in the corpus have therefore been categorized as to whether they occur in a clause of that kind or not.

Our hypothesis has been that a conditional construction is a favourable environment for du, because the risk of the addressee misinterpreting the pronoun as referring to her, is minimized – due to the hypothetical or generalizing nature of this construction.

We have therefore expected the share of du to be larger in conditional constructions than in other constructions seen as a whole.
This diagram shows that the pronoun *du* does comprise a larger share of the generic pronouns in conditional constructions than in other syntactic environments seen as a whole.

The share of *du* is almost 60 percent larger in conditional constructions.

So the results support the hypothesis that conditional constructions favor the use of *du*.

I see this *not* as indicating that generic *du* is somehow attracted to conditional constructions as such, but rather as indicating that the use of generic *du* is precluded in some contexts, namely in contexts where the risk of misinterpreting the pronoun as referring specifically to the second person is too big. *And* that conditional constructions is a type of context where this is *not* the case. Therefore the share of *du* is relatively high.
Change from first to second recordings

Hypothesis:

• The *du/man* ratio changes from the first to the second recording of the informants, with *du* gaining ground at the expense of *man*

• The share of *du* is highest in the Copenhagen (and Næstved) data, as the change is likely to originate in the metropolitan area, and in the speech of the younger informants

But what about the hypothesis that there is an ongoing change in the use of Danish pronouns in the way that *du* gains ground at the expense of *man* – and that the share of *du* is higher in the Copenhagen and Næstved data than in the Odder data?
The results show that, indeed, a change has occurred in the use of *du* versus *man*: In Odder, *du* comprises 7% of the pronouns in the old recordings and 17% in the new recordings. That is more than a doubling of the share during the 20 years interval between the two recordings – by the same speakers.

In Næstved, the share of *du* is 18% in the old and 24% in the new recordings, and in Copenhagen 19 and 23%, respectively.

The differences are in all cases statistically significant, but they are biggest in Odder and smallest in Copenhagen.

The results also show that the share of *du* is higher among the Næstved- and Copenhagen-speakers than among the Odder-informants, especially in the old, but also in the new recordings.

In contrast, there is no significant difference between the speakers from Copenhagen and Næstved – neither in the new nor in the old recordings.

This is consistent with the hypothesis that the change has its origin in Copenhagen – if we assume that the development in Næstved already at the time of the first recordings had caught up with the development in Copenhagen.

When the speakers are divided according to class and gender there are significant differences in their use of generic *du*, and the development in their use, but it will not have time to go into that in this paper.

Overall, the results do not indicate that *du* is competing out *man* as generic pronoun in Danish.

They indicate, rather, that the use of generic *du* has stabilized or is in the process of stabilizing – in Copenhagen and Næstved, anyhow.
As already mentioned, *du* and *man* are semantically equivalent as far as *descriptive reference* is concerned – generic *du* and *man* have the same denotative potential.

But I do *not* think that the semantic equivalence between *du* and *man* is complete – it may in many cases carry a meaning whether *du* or *man* is chosen as the expression of a generic referent. This subtle difference between *du* and *man* has to do with the positioning of the speaker and the hearer in relation to the situations or events mentioned:

By using *du* the addressee is invited to see the phenomena in question from the inside, so to speak, that is from the viewpoint of the generalized person, while *man* is more or less neutral in this respect.

Because the situations and events described in reality very often are related to the experiences of the speaker, the choice of *du* presumes that the addressee is capable of, and willing to, see the events from the same perspective as the speaker. And therefore the act of using *du* can function as a marker of intimacy.

But most likely, it also has functions in relation to the power balance in the interaction between the speaker and the addressee, and the difference in meaning between *du* and *man* should probably be seen in a broader perspective of relational regulation.

I haven’t studied this perspective systematically yet, but it will be included in the next phase of the study.
Why has *du* gained ground in the recent decades?

- Influence from English
- Changes in interactional patterns:
  - intimization of public discourse
  - higher priority of *camaraderie* as expression of positive politeness (c.f. Brown & Levinson 1987)
  - Speaker/text orientation > recipient orientation

The rise in the use of generic *du* which can be seen in the period studied, that is from the mid 1980ies to today, doesn’t seem to be directly related to a change in the meaning potential of the second person pronoun as seen from a structuralist viewpoint. At least, this study hasn’t established such change as the pronoun *du* is represented in the same categories of use in the old recordings as in the new. So if a regrammation of *du* in the direction of being able to function as a full fledged generic pronoun has taken place, this has happened before the first recording in the mid 80ies.

But to all appearances, the possibility of using the second person pronoun with generic reference hasn’t been exploited in any quantitatively significant way until the last decades in Danish, as well as in other languages such as French. This change in language use may of course be caused by influence from English which during the second half of the 20th century has become the dominant language, at least in the part of the world in which Denmark is situated.

But the development may also be driven by general changes in our ways of interacting with each other: As already mentioned there is most likely a subtle difference in meaning between *du* and *man* in relation to the regulation of the relationship between the speaker, the hearer and the events or situations described, in the way that *du* in contrast to *man* indicates a recipient oriented viewpoint.

A societal change likely to encourage the use of generic *du* is the intimization of public discourse which undoubtedly has taken place in Denmark since the 1970ies. It could also be a higher priority of *camaraderie* – that is presuming common ground between the speaker and the addressee – as expression of conversational politeness.

And more generally an increasing degree of recipient orientation in linguistic interaction.