

‘How’s the wife?’: Pragmatic reasoning and social indexicality in spousal reference

Building on e.g. Davis & Potts (2010), Acton (2014, 2019) demonstrates that certain expressions’ social meaning can largely be derived pragmatically from their semantic meanings. At the same time, Acton suggests that the full social meaning of a particular expression in a particular context cannot be predicted from semantic content alone, but will also depend crucially on social considerations. Examining reactions to various spouse-referring expressions (‘the/my/your/his/her wife/husband’), the present work demonstrates this precise dynamic—in this case, underscoring the essential role of the indexical associations and socio-cultural context of gendered expressions in those expressions’ social meanings.

Following Acton (2019), we predict via pragmatic reasoning over semantic meanings that using *the* rather than a possessive pronoun in spousal reference will tend to indicate: (i) an attempt to assert/foster shared perspective between interlocutors; and/or (ii) noteworthy distance between the speaker and their spouse. Concerning (i), *the* gives fewer clues about the referent’s identity, thus requiring the addressee to rely on their common ground with the speaker in securing reference. And while possessive pronouns place the referent in metaphorical proximity to some discourse participant/referent, *the* allows for the referent to be ‘equidistant’ from both interlocutors. In essence, using *the* suggests, ‘We have rich common ground, and are similarly positioned vis-à-vis our discourse referents’. Effect (ii) depends on the same basic semantic contrasts. E.g. *my* foregrounds the speaker’s relationship to the referent, whereas *the* is silent on the matter. Furthermore, using *the* rather than *your* or *his/her/their* may be interpreted as projecting one’s relation to one’s own spouse onto another couple’s relationship.

We tested these predictions via a matched-guise style experiment (Lambert et al, 1960), using a 2x2x3 research design (*the/possessive, wife/husband, 1st-3rd* person). 200 U.K. participants read 4 test dialogues with the same first utterance, but with the second utterance varying by carrier sentence, determiner, person, and spousal gender.

- (1) A: Shall we go for drinks with Sam and Alex on Friday?
B: Sounds good, I/you/Sam should ask the/my/your/his/her wife/husband if she/he wants to come

The speaker of each dialogue’s second utterance were rated on eight distinct 1-6 scales (Fig.1). Participants’ demographic information was also collected (e.g. gender, age, marital status).

Our findings support our pragmatically derived predictions. Employing Principal Component Analysis, we find that *the*-users are rated higher on ‘extrovert’ and lower on ‘cool’— suggesting a speaker who tries, perhaps too hard, to assert/foster solidarity—and lower on ‘is close to their spouse’. Crucially, however, these effects are stronger for ‘the wife’ than for ‘the husband’ (Fig.2, 3). We submit that this difference stems from the indexical baggage of ‘the wife’ and the culture-specific nature of gender, which models based on semantics alone cannot access. Preliminary analysis of participants’ demographics also indicates that these effects are age-dependent, with younger participants showing significantly greater dispreference for ‘the wife’ (Fig.4).

Thus, although semantics-based pragmatics offers principled predictions, it is insufficient for fully understanding these expressions’ social meanings. One must further situate such predictions in the particular socio-cultural context in which the expressions occur.

Views men and women as equal	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6	Doesn't view men and women as equal	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6
Entitled	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6	Not entitled	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6
Friendly	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6	Unfriendly	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6
Warm	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6	Cold	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6
Polite	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6	Impolite	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6
Is close to their spouse	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6	Isn't close to their spouse	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6
Introvert	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6	Extrovert	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6
Cool	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6	Uncool	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6

Figure 1 - Experiment Scales

Uncool + Extrovert + Isn't close to their spouse			
Predictors	Estimates	CI	p
(Intercept)	-0.00	-0.40 – 0.40	0.997
Husband	-0.16	-0.27 – -0.05	0.006
My	-0.27	-0.38 – -0.15	<0.001
2nd Person	0.30	0.20 – 0.40	<0.001
3rd Person	0.17	0.07 – 0.28	0.001
Husband:My	0.22	0.06 – 0.38	0.008
Random Effects			
σ^2	0.36		
τ_{00} ParticipantID	0.29		
τ_{00} Set	0.15		
ICC ParticipantID	0.36		
ICC Set	0.19		
Observations	860		

Figure 2 - Scale ~ Gender * Determiner + Person + (1|Participant) + (1|Sentence type)

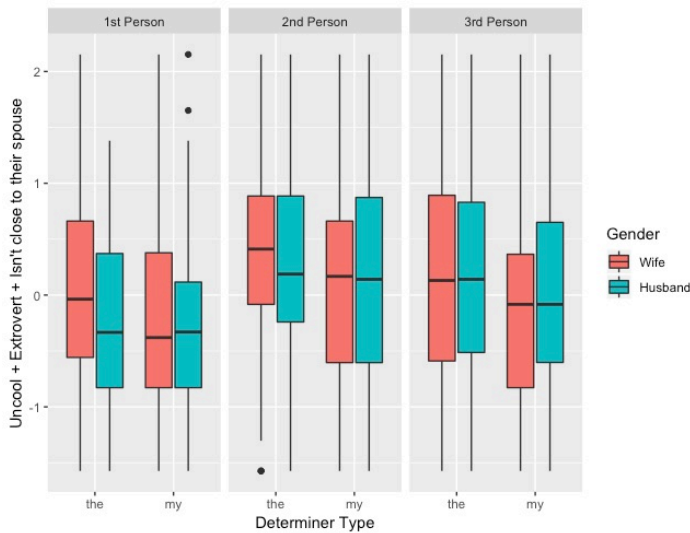


Figure 3 – Plot: Scale ~ Gender + Determiner + Person

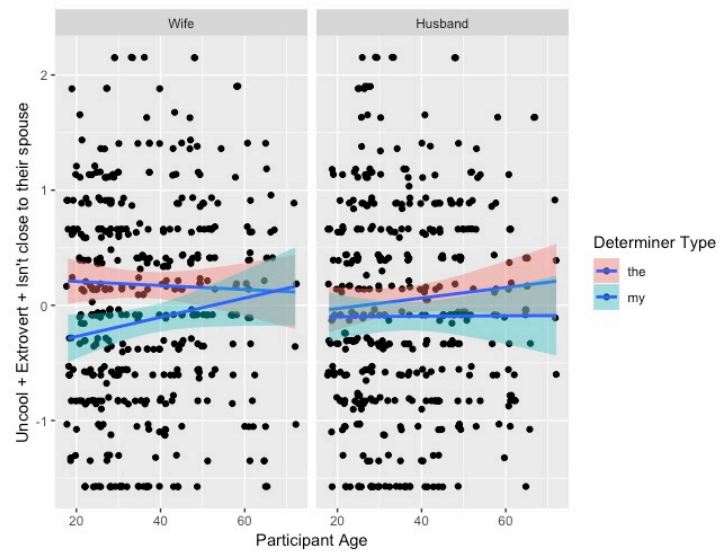


Figure 4 – Plot: Scale ~ Gender + Determiner + Participant Age

References

- Acton, E. K., & Potts, C. (2014). That straight talk: Sarah Palin and the sociolinguistics of demonstratives. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 18(1), 3-31.
- Acton, E. K. (2019). Pragmatics and the social life of the English definite article. *Language*, 95(1), 37-65.
- Davis, C., & Potts, C. (2010). Affective demonstratives and the division of pragmatic labor. In *Logic, Language and Meaning* (pp. 42-52). Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg.
- Lambert, W. E., Hodgson, R. C., Gardner, R. C., & Fillenbaum, S. (1960). Evaluational reactions to spoken languages. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 60(1), 44.