

## A Translation-Oriented Approach to Person Deixis

Oana-Maria PUIU\*

**Abstract:** The paper focuses on the equivalence of person deixis in the translation of the World Health Organization (WHO) institutional discourse in the context of COVID 19. Accordingly, the aim of the paper is twofold: to detect the linguistic and cultural gaps between the source text in English and the target text in Romanian with respect to the conceptualization and grammatical encoding of person deixis, and to determine the optimal, context-sensitive equivalents in translation. Our assumption is that, given the text type and the supranational identity of the text producer (WHO), the optimal equivalents will be based on cultural symmetry.

**Keywords:** institutional discourse, person deixis, translation studies

### 1. Introduction

The aim of the paper is to establish how person deixis differs in Romanian compared to English, with reference to the institutional discourse of the World Health Organization (WHO) in the context of COVID 19. In order to identify the differences and similarities between the source text in English and the target text in Romanian, we shall firstly define *deixis* and, more particularly, *person deixis*. Our analysis will take into consideration the following criteria: context (the identity of the text producer and the extent to which the pandemic may influence the choice of optimal equivalents in translation), cultural gaps (since culture is an important factor in the interpretation of a text, cultural gaps could impair the quality of the target text) and grammatical encoding (there are differences between Romanian and English regarding the grammatical encoding of person deixis).

---

\* PhD Student, *Alexandru Piru* Doctoral School, University of Craiova, E-mail: [puiu\\_oana\\_maria@yahoo.com](mailto:puiu_oana_maria@yahoo.com)

### 1.1. Outlining *deixis*

According to Levinson (1983: 54), *deixis* is “a pragmatic phenomenon concerned with the linguistic encoding of the context of utterance”. Levinson (1983: 62-63) distinguishes between five broad categories of deictic reference: person deixis, place deixis, time deixis, discourse or text deixis, social deixis.

Person deixis is related to the participants directly engaged in the utterance (*I, we*), indirectly engaged in the utterance (*you*) and those that are made known in the utterance (*he, she, they*).

Place deixis focuses on the location of the participants. Some of the most frequently encountered spatial deictic terms are the adverbs of place (*here, there*) and the demonstrative pronouns (*this, these, that, those*).

Time deixis refers to the time when the utterance is produced. Verbal tenses and time adverbs (*tomorrow, yesterday, now*) connect the utterance to a given point in time.

Discourse or text deixis is concerned with expressions that refer to previous or upcoming parts of the utterance. For example, in the sentence “This is an interesting article”, *this* alludes to a previous part of the discourse, whereas in the sentence “That was a captivating article”, *that* is related to an upcoming part of the discourse.

Social deixis refers to “aspects of the social relationship holding between speaker and addressee(s) or speaker and some referent” (Levinson, 1983: 63). It is encoded in different terms of address, such as *Sir, Madam, grandpa, grandma*, indicating social relations of respect or intimacy.

### 1.2. Defining person deixis – comparative views

Person deixis “concerns the encoding of the role of the participants in the speech event in which the utterance is delivered”, according to Levinson (1983: 62). The roles that individuals play in the speech event are those of speaker (first person pronouns), addressee (second person pronouns) and bystanders (third person pronouns).

Regarding the addressee, Bell (1984: 158-161) coined the phrase *audience design*, defined as the extent to which the speakers accommodate to their addressees, making a distinction between addressees (ratified participants directly addressed), auditors (ratified participants, not directly addressed), overhearers (not ratified participants, not directly addressed) and eavesdroppers (the speaker is not aware of the presence of these participants).

Discussing the roles the participants have in the course of conversation, i.e., turn-taking shift, the speaker’s *I* becomes the addressee’s *you*. In this respect, Jespersen (1922: 123) used the term *shifters* to refer to words “whose meaning differs according to the situation”. We identify the following categories of person deixis: first

person pronoun *I*, *we*, representing the grammatical encoding of the reference to the speaker, the second person pronoun *you*, representing the grammatical encoding of the reference to the addressee, and the third person pronoun *he, she, they*, representing the grammatical encoding of the reference to the bystanders (Vîlceanu, 2011: 56).

Yule (1996: 11-12) mentions a potential ambiguity in English in some uses of *we* “which allows two different interpretations. There is an exclusive *we* (speaker plus other(s), excluding addressee) and an inclusive *we* (speaker and addressee included).” The category first person pronoun has the semantic feature of speaker inclusion (+S), the category second person pronoun includes the addressee, but not the speaker (+A, -S), and the third person pronoun is a residual category that does not include the speaker or the addressee (-S, -A) (Levinson, 2006: 112). Dwelling on the first person pronoun category, we distinguish between the inclusive-of-addressee and the exclusive-of-addressee *we*. Not all languages have an inclusive/exclusive distinction. Cysouw (2013: 2ff.) exemplifies by five categories of languages with regard to the values of *I* and *we*: *no grammaticalized marking at all* (languages that do not have a grammaticalized marking for *we*), *‘we’ and ‘I’ identical* (languages that use the same pronoun to express both *I* and *we*), *no inclusive/exclusive opposition* (languages that have one pronoun for *I* and a different pronoun for *we*, but there is no inclusive/exclusive opposition, English is one of these languages), *only inclusive differentiated* (languages that do not differentiate between the singular and plural form of the first person pronoun, but use different pronouns to express the inclusive meaning, on the one hand, and the exclusive meaning, on the other hand), *inclusive and exclusive differentiated* (languages with specialised pronouns for both inclusive and exclusive reference).

The category of second person pronoun manifests through morphological markers which convey the T/V relationship in some languages, like Romanian, while other languages, such as English, do not have such markers. According to Mühlhäusler (1990:135) the letters T and V “are taken from the Latin Imperial convention of addressing the Emperor as Vos and everyone else as tu. Thus, T indicates any pronoun of condescension or intimacy, while V represents any pronoun of respect or formality.” In present-day English, the verb is not marked for the purpose of conveying the T/V relationship – the inventory of the language does not have a lexeme and an inflexional morpheme to serve this purpose (Bilá, 2017: 80ff.). In Romanian, however, there are different person pronoun forms that convey the T/V relationship (*tu*, familiar, singular form; *dumneata*, formal/ polite/ hierarchical, singular form; *voi*, familiar, plural form; *dumneavoastră*, formal/ polite/ hierarchical, plural form).

While in English the form *you* is used for both singular and plural, nominative and objective case, in Romanian there are different person pronouns forms for singular and plural nominative case (*tu, voi*) and singular and plural objective case (*tine/te, voi/vă*). Furthermore, the verbs that concord with those pronouns contain a special inflectional morpheme. This means that in Romanian, as in German and Spanish (Yule, 1996: 10), and some Asian languages like Bengali

(Uddin, 2020: 348), the addressee is identified in terms of number and case, in addition to participant role in the conversation.

According to Levinson (2006: 112), “many languages have no third person pronouns, often indirectly marking third person by zero agreement”. The descriptive content of the third person pronoun category “does not suffice to identify a referent”, this category is thus ranked as deficient to the highest degree in this respect: “she – the woman – the beautiful woman – Anne” (Vîlceanu, 2011: 56). In both English and Romanian there is a distinction between the third person singular pronoun (*he, she, it*) and the third person plural pronoun (*they*). However, in Romanian we differentiate between *ei*, the masculine third person plural pronoun, and *ele*, the feminine third person plural pronoun. In Romanian, we translate *it* with *el* (*he*) or *ea* (*she*), according to natural gender.

## 2. Person deixis in the institutional discourse on COVID 19

We shall focus on the use of person deixis in the institutional discourse of WHO centering on the COVID-19 issue, by also analysing the socio-cultural and linguistic context. In doing so, the supranational identity of the text producer is worth describing. According to the official website, WHO became operative 73 years ago and has since helped solve health-related issues globally.

WHO began when our Constitution came into force on 7 April 1948 – a date we now celebrate every year as World Health Day. We are now more than 7000 people from more than 150 countries working in 150 country offices, in 6 regional offices and at our headquarters in Geneva. (<https://www.who.int/about/who-we-are>)

WHO works worldwide to promote health, keep the world safe, and serve the vulnerable. (...) Our goal is to ensure that a billion more people have universal health coverage, to protect a billion more people from health emergencies, and provide a further billion people with better health and well-being. (<https://www.who.int/about/what-we-do>)

We distinguish between two values of *we* in the above mentioned quotations: the inclusive-of-speaker and inclusive-of-addressee *we* (*a date we now celebrate every year as World Health Day*) – *we* refers to all the people in the world, and the inclusive-of-speaker and exclusive-of-addressee *we* (*We are now more than 7000 people*) – *we* refers to the people who are employed by WHO.

We have built a dedicated corpus made up of 25 texts, representing the institutional discourse of WHO in the context of COVID 19. The texts contain the opening remarks at media briefings on COVID 19 pertaining to WHO Director-General, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in a timeframe of sixty days (15.01 – 15.03.2021).

In the selected corpus, the number and share of occurrences of the person deictic elements are graphically represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Division	Kind of expression	Type of pronoun	Number of occurrences	Values
First	Singular	I	133	(+S, -A)
	Plural	we	124	(+S, +A)
		we	140	(+S, -A)
		we	49	(+S, +/- A)
Second		you	74	(-S, +A) (addressees - ratified participants directly addressed)
		you	33	(-S, +A) (auditors - ratified participants, not directly addressed)
Third	Singular	he	0	(-S, -A)
	Singular	she	0	(-S, -A)
	Plural	they	0	(-S, -A)

### 3. Translating person deixis in the institutional discourse on COVID 19

When providing matching terms at word level (Dejica, 2008) in translating person deixis in the discourse of WHO from English into Romanian, we should also consider the fact that WHO is an international large-scale organisation and that COVID 19 is a worldwide unprecedented pandemic, hence, we expect markers of solidarity. It is axiomatic to say that “we need to pay particular attention to the use of the words *form* and meaning. We see that whatever type of translation we discuss, form has to change, but meaning has to stay.” (Kitis, 2009: 64).

Our suggestions for the equivalents of the person deictic items in Romanian can be represented in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2

English pronoun	Romanian pronoun	Number of occurrences	Values in English	Values in Romanian
I	eu	133	(+S, -A)	(+ S, -A)
we	noi	124	(+S, +A)	(+S, + A)
we	noi	140	(+S, -A)	(+S, -A)
we	noi	49	(+S, +/- A)	(+S, +/- A)
you (objective case)	tine	11	Familiar (-S, +A) (addressees)	Singular, familiar (-S, +A) (addressees)
you	dumneavoastră	55	Formal (-S, +A) (addressees)	Singular, formal (-S, +A) (addressees)
you	dumneavoastră	8	Formal (-S, +A) (addressees)	Plural, formal (-S, +A) (addressees)

you	dumneavoastră	33	Formal (-S, +A) (auditors)	Plural, formal (-S, +A) (auditors)
-----	---------------	----	----------------------------------	--

We have encountered a prevalence of the category of the first person pronouns in the texts that we have selected: *I* – 133 occurrences, *we* - 313 occurrences, so we shall enlarge on these pronouns, their functions and their equivalents in translation.

The analysis shows that the category of the first person singular pronoun *I* shows an individual reference – *I* refers to WHO Director-General, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in all 133 occurrences - “I wish you all a very productive discussion, and I look forward to your advice on next steps.” (Who Director-General 3 March 2021). We need to maintain the individual reference that *I* has in the source text by using the category first person singular pronoun in Romanian as well: “Vă doresc să aveți parte de o discuție productivă și aștept cu nerăbdare sfaturile dumneavoastră în legătură cu următorii pași de urmat.”

The category of the first person plural pronoun *we* has a collective reference in the sentence “But *we* need more treatment options for all phases of the diseases, and *we* need them fast” (Who Director-General 3 March 2021); *we* refers to everyone who is affected by the pandemic, whereas in the sentence “We welcome the commitment by the Quad countries to deliver up to 1 billion doses of vaccine in the Asia-Pacific region through COVAX.”, *we* refers to the WHO staff. We can further on make a distinction between two types of *we*: an inclusive-of-addressee first person plural pronoun (124 occurrences) and an exclusive-of-addressee first person plural pronoun (140 occurrences). In the sentence “I know that all of us are tired of this pandemic. We are ready to get back to our lives” (Who Director-General 25 February 2021), *we* refers to everyone who is affected by the pandemic, and is therefore inclusive-of-addressee. However, in the citation

Over the next days and weeks, we continued to sound that alarm loud and clear, and we continued giving countries the strategies, the guidance and the tools they needed to prepare for, prevent, detect and respond to the spread of this new virus. We continued to warn that the world had a narrow window of opportunity to prepare for and prevent a potential pandemic. (Who Director-General 8 March 2021)”

*we* refers to those who have the power of decision making, and is thus exclusive-of-addressee.

We need to maintain the inclusive-of-addressee reference and the exclusive-of-addressee reference that *we* has in the source texts by using the category first person plural pronoun in Romanian as well:

Știu că suntem cu toții epuizați de această pandemie. Suntem gata să ne întoarcem la viețile noastre de dinainte. (our translation)

În următoarele zile și săptămâni, am continuat să tragem semnale foarte clare de alarmă, și am continuat să dăm țărilor strategiile, instrucțiunile și instrumentele necesare pentru a se pregăti, pentru a preveni, a detecta și a combate răspândirea acestui nou virus. Am continuat să avertizăm asupra faptului că lumea a avut o scurtă perioadă de timp oportunitatea să se pregătească și să prevină o potențială pandemie. (our translation)

We can hence come to the conclusion that *we* also has an exclusive-of-addressee reference in both English and Romanian and that there is no cultural gap between the two languages in this regard, either.

In other cases, *we* preserves collective reference, but it creates ambiguity, since *we* could be interpreted either as inclusive of addressee or exclusive of addressee (49 occurrences) – “But we need more treatment options for all phases of the disease, and we need them fast. We must not waste time, energy and resources in duplicating efforts.” (Who Director-General 3 March 2021). Since the first person plural pronoun category can have the same ambiguous, collective, inclusive or exclusive of addressee reference in Romanian as well, we maintain the ambiguous reference *we* has in English: “Dar avem nevoie de mai multe opțiuni pentru tratament, pentru toate etapele bolii, și avem nevoie urgentă de ele. Nu trebuie să pierdem timp, energie și resurse prin dublarea eforturilor.” (our translation)

We can conclude that, given the context, namely the supranational identity of the text producer and the widespread of COVID 19, the optimal equivalents in translating person deixis from the source text in English to the target text in Romanian will be based on linguistic and cultural symmetry. We can furthermore gather that both individual and collective functions of the pronominals are valuable in the monolingual analysis and in the translation of the WHO institutional discourse into Romanian. The effect of all the utterances containing the above-mentioned deictic elements on the addressee consists of persuading the hearer that one must (re)act appropriately and showing solidarity under the circumstances.

#### **4. Further grammatical and pragmatic considerations in translation**

Since in Romanian the verb conjugation includes reference to the person involved in the speech (Vîlceanu, 2011: 57), there will be no need to include the subject in the target text, otherwise the level of naturalness might be seriously affected – for instance, if we decide to keep the subject pronouns in Romanian.

I want to start by thanking all members of the international team for their work. (...) I want to clarify that all hypotheses remain open and require further study. (Who Director-General 11 February 2021).

becomes

\*Eu vreau să încep prin a mulțumi tuturor membrilor echipei internaționale pentru munca lor. (...) \*Eu vreau să clarific faptul că toate ipotezele rămân deschise și necesită să fie studiate mai îndeaproape. (our translation)

COVID-19 vaccines are a major scientific breakthrough and I know through COVAX that we will distribute them a lot more effectively than in the past. We are working hard but we must all do more to ensure that vaccines reach those that need them most. (Who Director-General 15 January 2021).

would read unnaturally as

Vaccinurile împotriva COVID-19 sunt o descoperire științifică majoră și știu că prin COVAX \*noi le vom distribui mult mai eficient decât înainte. \*Noi muncim din greu, dar \*noi toți trebuie să facem mai mult pentru a ne asigura că vaccinurile vor ajunge la cei care au cea mai mare nevoie de ele. (our translation)

## 5. Conclusion

We have established that *I* has individual reference in both English and Romanian, while *we* preserves collective reference, with a distinction between two types of *we*: an inclusive-of-addressee first person plural pronoun and an exclusive-of-addressee first person plural pronoun, in both English and Romanian.

We have come to the conclusion that the main difference between the encoding of person deixis in English and in Romanian is given by the fact that the verb conjugation in Romanian includes reference to the participants in the verb endings.

Overall, given the text type and the supranational identity of the text producer, the optimal equivalents for translating person deixis in the institutional discourse of WHO in the context of COVID-19 from the source text in English to the target text in Romanian will be based on cultural symmetry.

## References

1. Bell, A., 'Language Style as Audience Design' in *Language in Society*, Volume 13, No. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 145-204.
2. Bilá, M., Kačmárová, A., Kraviarová, M., 'Expressing Social Deixis through Prosody: A Case Study of American English' in *Journal of Theoretical Linguistics*, Volume 15, No. 1, 2017, pp. 80–93.
3. Cysouw, M., 'Inclusive/Exclusive Distinction in Independent Pronouns' in Dryer, Matthew S., Haspelmath, M. (eds) *The World Atlas of Language Structures Online*, Leipzig: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, 2013, pp. 1-13.
4. Dejica, D. 2008. 'Using Hol-Atomistic and Holistic Lexical and Grammatical Relations in Translation'. In Superceanu, R. & D. Dejica (eds.) *Professional Communication and Translation Studies*. 1/2008. Proceedings of the 5th International Conference, Timisoara, 13-14 September 2007. Timisoara: Politehnica University Press, pp. 147-150.



5. Jespersen, O., *Language, its Nature, Development and Origin*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922.
6. Kitis, E., 'The Pragmatic Infrastructure of Translation' in *Revista Brasileira de Tradutores No 18*. Brasil: Centro Universitário Ibero-Americano, 2009, pp. 63-85.
7. Levinson, S. C., 'Deixis' in Horn L. R., Ward G. (eds) *The Handbook of Pragmatics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp. 97-121.
8. Levinson, S. C., *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
9. Muhlhauser, P, Harré, R., *Pronouns and people: The linguistic construction of social and personal identity*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Pub, 1990.
10. Uddin, A., 'Second Person Pronouns as Person Deixis in Bengali and English: Linguistic Forms and Pragmatic Functions' in *International Journal of English Linguistics*, Volume 10, No. 1, Canadian Center of Science and Education, 2020, pp. 345-351.
11. Vîlceanu, T., *Introduction to Pragmatics. Coursebook*. Craiova: Universitaria, 2011.
12. Yule, G., *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

## Webography

1. Ghebreyesus T. A., 'WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 15 January 2021', <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19-15-january-2021>, 2021.
2. Ghebreyesus T. A., 'WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 22 January 2021', <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19-22-january-2021>, 2021.
3. Ghebreyesus T. A., 'WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 25 January 2021', <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19-25-january-2021>, 2021.
4. Ghebreyesus T. A., 'WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 4 February 2021', <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-member-states-briefing-on-covid-19---4-february-2021>, 2021.
5. Ghebreyesus T. A., 'WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 11 February 2021', <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-member-states-briefing-on-covid-19---11-february-2021>, 2021.
6. Ghebreyesus T. A., 'WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 25 February 2021', <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-member-states-briefing-on-covid-19-25-february-2021>, 2021.
7. Ghebreyesus T. A., 'WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 3 March 2021', <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-at-the-ad-hoc-consultation-on-covid-19-therapeutics>, 2021.

8. Ghebreyesus T. A., 'WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 4 March 2021', <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-financing-covid-19-vaccines-for-africa-a-whole-of-africa-approach-to-addressing-vaccine-access-delivery-and-uptake-4-march-2021>, 2021.
9. Ghebreyesus T. A., 'WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 4 March 2021', <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-member-states-information-session-on-covid-19-4-march-2021>, 2021.
10. Ghebreyesus T. A., 'WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 8 March 2021', <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19-8-march-2021>, 2021.
11. Ghebreyesus T. A., 'WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 12 March 2021', <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19-12-march-2021>, 2021.
12. Ghebreyesus T. A., 'WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 15 March 2021', <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19-15-march-2021>, 2021.
13. World Health Organization, 'Response to the pandemic from 31 December 2019', <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen>, 2021.
14. World Health Organization, 'What we do', <https://www.who.int/about/what-we-do>, 2021.
15. World Health Organization, 'Who we are', <https://www.who.int/about/who-we-are>, 2021.