

## The Impersonal Use of German 1st Person Singular *Ich*

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### Abstract

This paper replies to Ackema and Neeleman's (2018) claim that 1st person singular pronouns are grammatically blocked from having impersonal uses. In connection with this claim, they argue that the impersonal use of German 1st person singular *ich* described in Zobel 2014 does not exist. I show that Ackema and Neeleman's alternative analysis of the German data analyzed in Zobel 2014 is flawed, and that new considerations inspired by their proposal further support the claim that German *ich* has an impersonal use. This result not only has ramifications for Ackema and Neeleman's account of the morphosyntax and semantics of (impersonally usable) personal pronouns, but for anyone researching the morphosyntax and semantics of pronominal expressions and how these interact.

**Keywords:** impersonal use, first person singular pronouns, German *ich*, weak free adjuncts, predicative *als*-phrases

### 1 Issue: Impersonal Uses of 1st Person Singular Pronouns

One way to make general statements about humans is by using pronominal expressions that roughly contribute the meaning 'people in general', see (1).

- (1) a. One can't expect one's guests to pay for one's party.
- b. You can't expect your guests to pay for your party.

Cross-linguistically, we find languages that employ pronominal forms for which this is their "primary use" (*dedicated impersonal pronouns*, e.g., English *one* in (1a)), as well as languages that coopt personal pronouns for this task (*impersonally used personal*

*pronouns*, e.g., English 2nd singular *you* in (1b)). Both types of pronominal strategies are still not well-understood. For impersonally used personal pronouns, in particular, the following central cross-linguistic questions remain: (i) Which personal pronouns can be used impersonally in which language? (ii) Which combinations of person, number, and gender specifications are, in principle, compatible with an impersonal use?

In their recent monograph, Ackema and Neeleman (2018:9, 107) formulate a number of generalizations addressing (ii). One of them states that it is impossible for 1st person singular pronouns to have an impersonal use. This is supported by English *I* in (2), which cannot be interpreted as a statement about people in general.

(2) I can't expect my guests to pay for my party. (only speaker-referential)

Other languages that, like English, allow for an impersonal use of their 2nd person singular pronouns (see, e.g., Siewierska 2004:212 for a list) also mostly do not seem to allow for an impersonal use of their 1st person singular pronouns; at least for most of these languages, the existence of such an impersonal use has not been discussed so far.

One language for which the existence of an impersonal use of its 1st person singular pronoun has been discussed is German. In Zobel 2010, 2014, 2016, I argue that 1st singular *ich* 'I' has an impersonal use, which is, however, not as unrestrictedly available as the impersonal use of 2nd singular *du* 'you'. For an occurrence of *ich* to be understood impersonally, *ich* has to be accompanied by supporting material (Zobel 2014:32, 200–201): this can be a non-epistemic modal expression (e.g., a non-epistemic modal or conditional) and/or a predicative *als*-phrase (Engl. 'as'-phrase). Both types of supporting material are present in the attested example in (3) (Zobel 2014:1).<sup>1</sup>

- (3) **Ich** kann doch als Brautpaar nicht von meinen Gästen erwarten, dass sie mir  
I can PRT as bridal.couple not from my guests expect that they me  
quasi die Feier finanzieren.  
more.or.less the party finance  
'A bridal couple can't expect their guests to more or less pay for the party!'

Example (3) contains a possibility modal *kann* 'can' that receives a deontic interpretation, and an *als*-phrase *als Brautpaar* 'as a bridal couple' for which *ich* serves as its *associated argument*. In Zobel 2014, I argue that (3) is a general statement about bridal couples that arises as follows: *ich* is interpreted roughly like 'people in general' (i.e., just like English *one* and impersonally used *you* in (1)), but this contribution is restricted by the *als*-phrase to denote 'bridal couples in general' (Zobel 2014:285).

If German 1st singular *ich* does indeed have an impersonal use, it is a counterexample to Ackema and Neeleman's generalization. Ackema and Neeleman are aware of this data and my analysis, but they argue that 1st person singular pronouns in examples like (3) are not used impersonally. According to them, what I mistake for the semantic contribution of an impersonal use is an interpretive effect that arises as a result of the cooccurring *als*-phrase *als Brautpaar* 'as a bridal couple'.

The goal of this paper is to argue again in favor of my analysis in Zobel 2014 and to show that the evidence points towards German 1st singular *ich* having an impersonal use. I first discuss Ackema and Neeleman's argument against my analysis and highlight its empirical and theoretical flaws (section 2). Next, in section 3, I show that there is no evidence that German *als*-phrases are the source of the generality expressed by sentences

like (3), or that they have the interpretive effect that Ackema and Neeleman claim them to have. Lastly, in section 4, I reaffirm my analysis in Zobel 2014 that German 1st singular *ich* has an impersonal use by showing that *ich* behaves semantically just like 2nd singular *du* ‘you’, for which it is uncontroversial that it has a referential and an impersonal use.

Before starting out, let me briefly address the relevance of clarifying whether German *ich* has an impersonal use or not. Ackema and Neeleman’s claim that 1st person singular pronouns are grammatically incompatible with an impersonal use has ramifications for the current morphosyntactic and semantic research on personal pronouns. One of the central lines of research combining the morphosyntax and semantics of personal pronouns investigates how the denotation of personal pronouns relates to their  $\phi$ -features, and how these denotations may be composed from these  $\phi$ -features if we assume that  $\phi$ -features contribute the building blocks of pronominal meaning (see, e.g., Ackema and Neeleman 2018; Kratzer 2009; Sudo 2012; and references therein). Impersonal uses of personal pronouns constitute important test cases for accounts that aim to address these questions—in particular in connection with the treatment of person features. For instance, proposals discussing 2nd person singular pronouns, like English *you*, need to simultaneously account for the addressee-referential use and the impersonal (i.e., non-referential) use, which can result in a generic statement that does not apply to the addressee.<sup>2</sup> That is, if the 2nd person feature is hard-wired to contribute reference to the addressee, as in Kratzer 2009, what happens with this hard-wiring in the impersonal use?

Ackema and Neeleman (2018) are one of the first who aim to provide a feature-based account that captures all and only those referential and impersonal interpretations

that are cross-linguistically possible. This is a difficult task, for which it is essential to start with as complete an overview of the cross-linguistic data as possible. So, their dismissal of the German data as an “apparent exception” (p. 109) to their generalization about 1st person singular pronouns has to be well-founded. This is not only important for their own account, given their claim that their feature system is “sufficient to generate an adequate typology of impersonal pronouns and their various interpretations” (p. 106). Inaccurately denying the existence of impersonally used 1st person singular pronouns also has ramifications for future investigations that might take their generalizations at face value.

As outlined above, I will argue that German *ich* does indeed have an impersonal use. Given Ackema and Neeleman’s counterproposal, the argument mainly focuses on the interpretation of German *als*-phrases. Establishing the relevant semantic details may at times get tedious, but they are central to the main goal of this paper: to show that 1st person singular pronouns are not grammatically blocked from being used impersonally.

## **2 Ackema and Neeleman’s (2018) Counterproposal**

This section provides a critical discussion of Ackema and Neeleman’s (2018:109–112; henceforth: A&N) counterproposal to the claim I defended in Zobel 2014 that German 1st singular *ich* has an impersonal use in examples like (3). In brief, A&N’s counterproposal is that any “generic flavor” (p. 109) that is perceived for the German examples arises as a result of the cooccurring *als*-phrase.<sup>3</sup>

The central empirical flaw of A&N’s discussion is their decision to forgo examining German examples; their entire argument in favor of their counterproposal is based on their translation of (3) into Dutch, see (4). They justify this switch from German to Dutch by

stating that “the kind of example that illustrates this [i.e., the putative impersonal use of German *ich*, SZ] is also attested in Dutch” (p. 109). However, with the risk of stating the obvious, patterns in the syntax and semantics of expressions of one language are not automatically valid for their counterparts in other languages—even if these languages belong to the same language family, and the expressions in question are diachronically related. So, even if A&N’s proposal accurately captures their intuitions for Dutch, which I will not discuss in this paper, there is no guarantee that their analysis of these intuitions adequately extends to German, unless they show that their observations about Dutch also hold for German. Since they never address German, they thus do not show that German *ich* cannot be used impersonally; they only show that Dutch *ik* plausibly cannot.

In the remainder of this section, I present A&N’s argument for why the *als*-phrase and not *ik* contributes the intuitive generic flavor of (4), and I discuss their proposal for how this generic flavor arises.<sup>4</sup> The applicability to German is addressed in Section 3.

A&N’s central argument for why the generic flavor of (4) is contributed by the cooccurring *als*-phrase is that it disappears when the *als*-phrase is omitted: with (5), the speaker can only talk about herself.<sup>5</sup>

(4) **Ik** kan toch als bruidspaar niet verwachten dat de gasten het feest betalen.

I can PRT as bridal.couple not expect that the guests the party pay

‘One cannot expect the guests to pay for the party when one gets married.’ (p. 109)

(5) **Ik** kan toch niet verwachten dat de gasten het feest betalen.

I can PRT not expect that the guests the party pay

‘I cannot expect the guests to pay for the party.’ (p. 111)

(*unavailable*: ‘One cannot expect the guests to pay for the party.’)

This omission test contrasts *ik* with the weak 2nd singular pronoun *je* ‘you’, which has an impersonal use. Impersonally used *je* can also associate with an *als*-phrase, as in (6a), but the generic interpretation persists when the *als*-phrase is omitted, compare (5) to (6b).

(6) a. **Je** kan toch als bruidspaar niet verwachten dat. . .

you.SG can PRT as bridal.couple not expect that

‘One cannot expect that [. . .] when one gets married.’ (p. 111)

b. **Je** kan toch niet verwachten dat. . .

you.SG can PRT not expect that

‘One cannot expect that. . .’ (generic)

‘You cannot expect that. . .’ (referential) (p. 112)

Hence, for Dutch 1st singular *ik* but not for 2nd singular *je*, the presence or absence of an *als*-phrase seems to determine whether the containing sentence has a generic flavor.

The core of A&N’s proposal for how the generic flavor with *ik* arises is that the function of the *als*-phrase in sentences like (4) and (7) is to describe a “guise” (p. 110) of the referent of its associated argument (i.e., the subject). This guise may be one of the functions that the associated referent actually has, or it may be “imaginary” in the sense that “the associated referent need not actually have the attribute described” (p. 110). Thus, the *als*-phrase in (4) is taken to describe an imaginary guise of the speaker (since the

speaker is not a bridal couple), while the *als*-phrase in (7) is taken to describe an actual guise of the referent of *ze* 'she' (assuming that the referent of *ze* is in fact a mayor).

(7) **Ze** kan als burgemeester toch niet verwachten dat de gasten het feest betalen.

she can as mayor PRT not expect that the guests the party pay

'As a mayor, she cannot expect her guests to pay for the party.' (p. 110)

The generic flavor observed with these sentences arises because the *als*-phrase affects the main predication: the main clause predicate is applied to the subject referent only in the guise described by the *als*-phrase. As a result of this restriction, A&N claim, examples with *als*-phrases imply general statements that link the *als*-predicate to the main clause predicate. Hence, (4) implies that bridal couples can't expect their guests to pay for the party, and (7) implies that mayors can't expect their guests to pay for the party.

The final ingredient of their proposal is that imaginary guises, but not actual guises, are restricted with respect to their associated arguments. In declarative clauses, *als*-phrases contributing imaginary guises can only associate with 1st person singular pronouns, as in (4), while in interrogative clauses, they can only associate with strong 2nd person singular arguments, see (9a). This restriction lies behind the difference in grammaticality between (7) (actual guise) and (8) (imaginary guise), and captures the difference in acceptability between (9a) (interrogative) and (9b) (declarative).<sup>6</sup>

(8) \***Ze** kan als bruidspaar toch niet verwachten dat. . .

she can as bridal.couple PRT not expect that



- (9) a. Zou **jij** als bruidspaar verwachten dat de gasten het feest betalen?  
 would you.SG as bridal.couple expect that the guests the party pay  
 ‘Would one expect the guests to pay for the party when one gets married?’
- b. \***Jij** zou toch als bruidspaar niet verwachten dat...  
 you.SG would PRT as bridal.couple not expect that

According to A&N, this restriction is in place because *als*-phrases contributing imaginary guises require “access to the referent’s mind” (p. 110), which, they argue, is only ensured in declarative clauses with 1st person singular pronouns and interrogative clauses with 2nd person singular pronouns.

The main theoretical flaw with A&N’s counterproposal is that its parts remain unclear; the authors neither define them, nor do they provide relevant references to understand them.

A&N’s claim that the function of Dutch *als*-phrases is to describe actual or imaginary guises seems to be motivated entirely by their intuitions about example (7), which, according to them, makes this function “apparent” (p. 110). I am not aware of any in-depth investigations of the syntax and semantics of Dutch *als*-phrases, although they have been at least addressed by de Swart et al. (2007). There are, however, syntactic and semantic investigations of English *as*-phrases and German *als*-phrases (e.g., Asher 2006, 2011; Flaate 2007; Jäger 2003; Szabo 2003; Zifonun 1998; Zobel 2017, 2018, 2019), as well as investigations of syntactically and semantically comparable expressions (i.e., *free adjuncts*, which include all types of secondary predicates, see, e.g., Fabricius-Hansen and Haug 2012; Stump 1985). A&N do not connect their claim to any of these works.

A&N also do not clarify which notion of guise they have in mind. In the literature, one notion is introduced by Heim (1998:214), for whom a guise is a contextually salient way in which an individual (e.g., the referent of a personal pronoun) is presented to the interlocutors. Another notion of guise is introduced by Safir, who uses it to talk about cases where “one person’s perspective is put into the shoes of another [individual]” (Safir 2004:115). Neither notion of guise fully captures what A&N use the term “guise” for. Heim’s notion of guise might work for cases like (7) (i.e., “she” is identified via her function as a mayor), but it is implausible that the speaker uses a Heimian guise to self-identify in (4). In contrast, Safir’s notion of guise might work for A&N’s imaginary guises (4) (i.e., the speaker takes on the perspective of some bridal couple), but the referent in (7) is not said to adopt someone else’s perspective: as A&N state, “she” in (7) has the function of being a mayor, so “she” does not take on someone else’s perspective when she acts as a mayor. Hence, it is unclear what A&N mean by “guise”.<sup>7</sup>

Lastly, the status of the translation A&N provide for (4) remains unclear throughout their discussion. According to them, the generic flavor is the result of an “implication” (p. 110). This crucially differs from my own proposal in Zobel 2014: I argue that the truth-conditional content of sentences like (3) is that of a generic sentence. So, if the translation in (4) is the result of an implication, what is the non-generic truth-conditional content?

In sum, Ackema and Neeleman (2018:109–112) argue that for Dutch *ik*, any perceived generic flavor in examples like (4) is tied to the presence of a predicative *als*-phrase that describes an imaginary guise of the associated referent (i.e., the speaker). The empirical and theoretical bases for this claim remain unclear.

### 3 Checking Ackema and Neeleman’s Claims for German

In this section, I show that the two central points of A&N’s argumentation for Dutch do not hold for German. First, I show that sentences containing *ich* but no *als*-phrase can have a generic interpretation, and second, I show that there is no evidence that German predicative *als*-phrases have the special use that A&N describe for Dutch *als*-phrases.<sup>8</sup>

#### 3.1 *Als-Phrases Are Not Necessary in German*

As A&N (2018:111) point out, it would be a problem for their counterproposal if the generic interpretation that arises with German *ich* did not need a cooccurring *als*-phrase. Here, they quote my statement that in German, sentences with *ich* do not require the presence of an *als*-phrase in order to receive a generic interpretation (Zobel 2014:32–33). They reply to this that “the Dutch equivalent of the example she cites does not allow the apparent generic reading at all” (p. 111–112). As I argued in the previous section, this may very well be, but the semantic behavior of Dutch *ik* does not automatically determine the interpretive possibilities for German *ich*. Hence, the relevant German data supporting my claim deserve at least another look.

In order to show that *als*-phrases are not necessary for the impersonal use of German *ich*, I give the constructed example in (10), which has a generic interpretation in the given context even though it does not contain an *als*-phrase.

(10) [*Context*: A and B see someone knock over bikes for fun.]

A: Sowas kann **ich** doch nicht machen!

something-like-this can I PRT not do

‘**One** shouldn’t do something like that!’

(Zobel 2014:36)

In (10), A does not say that A cannot knock over bikes for fun. The utterance is used to communicate that the actions witnessed by A and B are reprehensible because they violate a general (moral) rule. The same statement could be formulated, for instance, with a dedicated impersonal pronoun like English *one*, as in the given translation.

Since example (10) is constructed, one might argue that examples like these do not occur “in the wild”, and that impersonally used *ich* de facto always cooccurs with an *als*-phrase. That this is also not the case is shown by the attested example in (11).

(11) [*Context*: Soccer player A comments on the lack of effort put into the match by the opposing team, who are close to being relegated.]<sup>9</sup>

A: In so einer Situation muss **ich** doch 90 Minuten lang Gas geben.

in such a situation must I PRT 90 minutes long gas give

‘In such a situation, **one** has to work hard for 90 minutes.’

In the given context, it is clear that the speaker in (11) does not report a necessity for himself: A is not part of the team that faces relegation, and the issue is not what A’s obligations are in a comparable situation. With his statement, A reports his beliefs about how soccer players in general should behave when their team is close to being relegated. And just as for (10), the same general statement about individuals in such a situation can be formulated with a dedicated impersonal pronoun, as in the translation.

The astute reader may have observed that (10) and (11) both contain expressions that contain *so* ‘such’ and express comparative meaning: *sowas* ‘something like that’ and *in so einer Situation* ‘in such a situation’. Defenders of A&N’s counterproposal could argue that these expressions are ambiguous and have the same semantic effect that A&N

ascribe to *als*-phrases (i.e., they are the sources of the perceived generic flavor). And just as for *als*-phrases, they would have to assume that these expressions have their special, generic-flavor-inducing meaning only in connection with first singular *ich* because no generic interpretation arises with 3rd singular *er* ‘he’, see (12).

(12) [*Context*: A and B see a woman knock over bikes for fun.]

A: #Sowas                    kann **er** doch nicht machen!

something-like-this can he PRT not do

‘**He** shouldn’t do something like that!’)

(*unavailable*: ‘One shouldn’t do something like that!’)

The only possible interpretation for A’s utterance in (12) is one that makes a statement about a specific male individual, hence A cannot use it to talk about the woman knocking over bikes, and the entire utterance is pragmatically odd. Similarly, if *ich* in (11) were substituted with *er* ‘he’, the resulting utterance would be odd in the given context because there is no single male individual that A could be taken to talk about. In order to talk about the players of the other team, A would have to use 3rd plural *sie* or *die* ‘they’.

If impersonally used *ich* had to cooccur with either an *als*-phrase or an adjunct with comparative meaning, an extended version of A&N’s counterproposal might still be a viable option. However, we do find attested examples of impersonally used *ich* that do not contain any adverbial expressions, see (13).<sup>10</sup>

(13) [*Context*: In a forum for cars built by Audi, A posts a question about tuning the electronics of his Audi to lower gas consumption. He replies to an answer.]<sup>11</sup>

A: Deswegen frage ich hier nach Erfahrungen von Verbrauchern, denn als Firma  
 therefore ask I here after experiences of consumers because as company  
 kann **ich** natürlich viel erzählen. **Ich** will ja schliesslich was verkaufen.  
 can I naturally much tell I want.to PRT PRT something sell  
 ‘That is why I am asking for experiences of consumers because as a company, **one**  
 can claim a lot. **One** wants to sell something, after all.’

In (13), A’s second sentence expresses a generality about companies (i.e., they want to sell something). So, even though the second sentence contains *ich* but no adverbial expressions (*ja* and *schließlich* are discourse particles, see footnote 1), the sentence can express a generic statement. Indeed, *ich* in the second sentence seems to be anaphoric to the occurrence of *ich* that associates with the *als*-phrase *als Firma* ‘as a company’, just like the second occurrence of *one* in the translation is anaphoric to the first occurrence.

So, instead of assuming multiple ambiguities for non-obligatorily cooccurring material just to avoid the assumption of an impersonal use for *ich*, as well as trying to explain away examples like (13), it would be more parsimonious from a theoretical point of view to assume that German 1st singular *ich* has a special use that comes with a generic interpretation, an *impersonal use*.

### 3.2 *There Is No Evidence for a Special Use of German Als-Phrases*

Let us now take a closer look at whether there is evidence that predicative *als*-phrases in German have a special use that is restricted to referentially used 1st singular associated arguments in declarative clauses and 2nd singular associated arguments in interrogative clauses. In order to establish the availability of this special use in the absence of 1st

singular *ich*, I analyze the translations of A&N's Dutch examples (9b) and (9a), which contain the strong 2nd singular pronoun *jij*.

I translate (9a) and (9b) as (14) and (15), respectively. The main challenge in translating (9a) and (9b) lies in the fact that German does not have a strong 2nd singular pronoun that directly corresponds to Dutch *jij*. In order to get as close as possible to a 2nd singular pronoun that is necessarily referential, I use the regular German 2nd singular pronoun *du* but assume that it is stressed (indicated by upper case). Stress has been argued to promote or even force a referential interpretation for impersonally usable personal pronouns (see Gruber 2013; Zobel 2014). So, *DU* is strictly addressee-referential.

(14) ?Würdest **DU** als Brautpaar erwarten, dass die Gäste das Fest bezahlen?

would you as bridal.couple expect that the guests the party pay

'Would YOU<sub>sg</sub> as a bridal couple expect that the guests pay for the party?'

(15) ?**DU** würdest doch als Brautpaar nicht erwarten, dass die Gäste bezahlen.

you would PRT as bridal.couple not expect that the guests pay

'As a bridal couple, YOU<sub>sg</sub> wouldn't expect that the guests pay.'

A first contrast between the Dutch examples and the German translations concerns their grammaticality: A&N state that (9a) is grammatical, while (9b) is ungrammatical. This difference in grammaticality serves as evidence for their claim that the genericity-inducing, restricted use of predicative *als*-phrases is sensitive to whether the "[associated] referent's mind" (A&N 2018:110) is accessible: for 2nd singular *jij*, this is only the case in an interrogative clause (i.e., in (9a)). In contrast, the German translations in (14) and (15) are both grammatical; they are just equally semantically odd because the property of

being a bridal couple is ascribed to a single individual (i.e., the addressee).

Another difference to the Dutch example in (9a) arises with respect to A&N's claim that the restricted use of Dutch *als*-phrases implies a general statement. That is, (9a) is said to imply a general question about bridal couples. However, in their most natural interpretation neither (14) nor (15) imply a generalization about bridal couples: both sentences are about non-actual situations in which the addressee is (part of) a bridal couple and are best paraphrased with counterfactual conditionals, see (16).

(16) (14)  $\approx$  'If YOU<sub>sg</sub> were a bridal couple, would you expect that ...?'

(15)  $\approx$  'If YOU<sub>sg</sub> were a bridal couple, you wouldn't expect that ...'

Like these counterfactual conditionals, (14) and (15) can be uttered regardless of the generalizations pertaining to the expectations of bridal couples in general. That is, it is not inconsistent to utter either sentence after establishing that bridal couples in general expect their guests to pay for their party. For A&N's example (9a), this should be impossible.

Taken together, these two contrasts between the German data in (14) and (15) and what A&N say about (9a) and (9b) support the conclusion that the German *als*-phrases do not have the special use that A&N describe for Dutch. In fact, the two *als*-phrases in (14) and (15) show exactly the behavior that we would expect if they were used as *weak free adjuncts* (see Fabricius-Hansen and Haug 2012; Stump 1985; Zobel 2018, 2019).

Whenever German *als*-phrases (and English *as*-phrases) are used as weak free adjuncts, they intuitively contribute an adverbial-clause-like interpretation that varies between a causal-clause-like, conditional-clause-like, or temporal-clause-like interpretation. These interpretations are similar to that of *since*-clauses, hypothetical *if/when*-clauses, and



temporal *when*-clauses, respectively (e.g., Stump 1985; Zobel 2018).

While the causal-clause-like interpretation is available for any *als*-phrase in this use, the availability of the other two interpretations depends on the presence of cooccurring temporal and modal operators. This range of readings is illustrated in (17) and (18).

(17) Als Katzenfreund besitzt **Peter** zwei Katzen.

as cat.lover owns Peter two cats

‘As a cat lover, Peter owns two cats.’ (Zobel 2019:499)

Since (17) does not contain any temporal or modal operators, the *als*-phrase can only be interpreted like a *since*-clause: ‘Since Peter is a cat lover, he has two cats’. In contrast, the sentences in (18) contain temporal and modal operators that potentially interact with the cooccurring *als*-phrases, so these examples are ambiguous.

(18) a. Als Kind war **Hannah** schüchtern.

as child was Hannah shy

‘As a child, Hannah was shy.’ (past tense)

(≈ ‘When Hannah was a child, she was shy.’)

(≈ ‘Since Hannah is a child, she was shy.’)

b. Als Kind würde **Hannah** nichts zahlen.

as child would Hannah nothing pay

‘As a child, Hannah would not pay anything.’ (*would*)

(≈ ‘If Hannah were a child, she would not pay anything.’)

(≈ ‘Since Hannah is a child, she would not pay anything.’)

The sentence in (18a) contains a past temporal operator. When the *als*-phrase *als Kind* ‘as

a child' interacts with this operator, the *als*-phrase is intuitively interpreted like a temporal *when*-clause; when the *als*-phrase and the operator are interpreted independently from each other, the result is a *since*-clause-like interpretation. Similarly, the sentence in (18b) contains an irrealis modal. When the *als*-phrase interacts with the irrealis modal, it is interpreted like a hypothetical *if*-clause; when the *als*-phrase and the irrealis modal are interpreted independently, the result is a *since*-clause-like interpretation.

The *als*-phrases in (14) and (15) show the same range of interpretations that is possible for the *als*-phrase in (18b). The paraphrases in (16) capture the conditional-clause-like interpretations that arise from an interaction of the *als*-phrase with the modal operator *würde* 'would'. But just like the *als*-phrase in (18b), the *als*-phrases in (14) and (15) can also get a *since*-clause-like interpretation, see (19).

(19) (14)  $\approx$  'Since YOU<sub>sg</sub> are a bridal couple, would you expect that ...?'

(15)  $\approx$  'Since YOU<sub>sg</sub> are a bridal couple, you wouldn't expect that...'

The conditional-clause-like interpretation paraphrased in (16) is preferred over the causal-clause-like interpretation paraphrased in (19) because in the causal-clause-like interpretation, the predicate described by the *als*-complement (i.e., being a bridal couple) is ascribed to the associated referent (i.e., the addressee) in the actual world. In other words, for the paraphrases in (19) to be true, the singular addressee has to be a bridal couple, which is, strictly speaking, always false. This is not the case when the *als*-phrases get a conditional-clause-like interpretation in connection with *würde* 'would'. In that case, the predicate denoted by the *als*-complement (i.e., being a bridal couple) is counterfactually ascribed to the associated referent (i.e., the addressee). That is, the

paraphrases in (16) require the addressee to have counterparts that are (parts of) bridal couples, which is possible.

In connection with any general statements that might be implied by either (14) and (15), we find that an *als*-phrase with a causal-clause-like interpretation implies a generalization that connects the *als*-complement and the main clause predicate only when the *als*-phrase occurs in a declarative sentence / an assertion. We have seen above that *als*-phrases with a conditional-clause-like interpretation do not imply general statements. For the declarative sentence in (15), we observe that the causal-clause-like interpretation implies that bridal couples in general don't expect that their guests pay for the party. The causal-clause-like interpretation of the *als*-phrase in the interrogative sentence in (14), however, has a different effect. Like its paraphrase in (19), it provides an explanation for why the speaker poses the question to the addressee, which is not (necessarily) based on what is true for bridal couples in general and, thus, does not imply this generality.

In sum, section 3 has added to the evidence showing that in German, *als*-phrases are not necessary for a generic interpretation of 1st singular *ich*. In addition, we have seen that there is no evidence for a restricted use of German *als*-phrases in connection with referentially used 2nd person singular pronouns. In fact, the German *als*-phrases that associate with referential *du* in the translations of Ackema and Neeleman's Dutch examples behave like regular weak free adjuncts, which show a very different behavior from the restricted use that Ackema and Neeleman describe for Dutch *als*-phrases.

#### 4 German *Ich* Has an Impersonal Use

I now return to my original German example (3) and provide one further argument in favor of an impersonal use for 1st singular *ich* ‘I’. If *ich* in (3) were used referentially (as suggested by Ackema and Neeleman (2018:109–112)), then promoting a referential interpretation of *ich* by stressing the pronoun should not have an effect on the acceptability and interpretation of the example.

- (3) **Ich** kann doch als Brautpaar nicht von meinen Gästen erwarten, dass sie mir  
I can PRT as bridal.couple not from my guests expect that they me  
quasi die Feier finanzieren.  
more.or.less the party finance  
‘A bridal couple can’t expect their guests to more or less pay for the party!’

This is, however, not the case: the intuitive interpretations of (3) and (20) differ fundamentally. I start investigating this unexpected contrast by taking a closer look at (20).

- (20) ??**ICH** kann doch als Brautpaar nicht erwarten, dass die Gäste das Fest bezahlen.  
I can PRT as bridal.couple not expect that the guests the party pay  
‘As a bridal couple, I can’t expect that the guests pay for the party.’  
(≈ Since I am a bridal couple, I can’t expect that the guests pay for the party.)

Just as in (15) (repeated below), the *als*-phrase in (20) is a weak free adjunct that cooccurs with a modal verb. For (15), the presence of the modal *würde* ‘would’ was argued to make the sentence ambiguous between a preferred interpretation where the *als*-phrase is interpreted like a hypothetical *if*-clause (≈ ‘If YOU were a bridal couple, you wouldn’t expect that. . .’) and a less prominent interpretation where the *als*-phrase is interpreted like

a *since*-clause ( $\approx$  ‘Since YOU are a bridal couple, you wouldn’t expect that. . .’).

(15) ?DU würdest doch als Brautpaar nicht erwarten, dass. . .

you.SG would PRT as bridal.couple not expect that

‘As a bridal couple, YOU<sub>sg</sub> wouldn’t expect that. . .’

As indicated in (20), the *als*-phrase in (20) can only get a *since*-clause-like interpretation.

Why does (20) not have a conditional-clause-like interpretation, as well? This is due to the type of modal that is used. Weak adjunct *als*-phrases are only found to interact with irrealis modals, like *würde* ‘would’. They cannot interact with epistemic or root modals (Zobel 2018). This is shown for deontic *kann* ‘can’ in (21).

(21) [*Context*: Lisa needs legal advice. The trade union offers legal advice to members,

but Paul doesn’t know whether Lisa is a member.] (intended: deontic *kann*)

P: #Als Gewerkschaftsmitglied kann Lisa um Rechtsberatung ansuchen.

as union.member can Lisa about legal.advice apply

‘As a member of the union, Lisa can apply for legal advice.’

( $\approx$  ‘Since Lisa is a member of the union, she can apply for legal advice.’)

(*unavailable*: ‘If Lisa is a member of the union, she can apply for legal advice.’)

If the *als*-phrase in (21) were able to interact with deontic *kann* ‘can’, we would expect the sentence to have an interpretation that is comparable to a hypothetical indicative conditional ( $\approx$  ‘If Lisa is a member of the trade union, . . .’). With such an interpretation, (21) would be acceptable in the given context: Paul does not know whether Lisa is a member of the union, but if she is, she can apply for legal advice. This interpretation is, however, unavailable for (21). The *als*-phrase can only have a causal-clause-like

contribution ( $\approx$  ‘Since Lisa is a member of the trade union, she can apply for legal advice’), which results in Paul’s utterance being in conflict with the context.

Example (20), like (21), contains deontic *kann* ‘can’. Hence no conditional-clause-like interpretation is available for the *als*-phrase; only the causal-clause-like interpretation is possible. As shown in section 3.2, *als*-phrases with a causal-clause-like interpretation that occur in assertions imply a generic statement that connects the *als*-complement and the main clause predicate. Hence, in addition to the truth-conditional denotation given, (20) implies that bridal couples can’t expect their guests to pay for the party.<sup>12</sup>

So, both (3) and (20) intuitively convey that bridal couples can’t expect their guests to pay for their wedding party. However, there is an important difference: The general statement about bridal couples that is understood for (20) is *implied* as a result of the causal-clause-like interpretation of the *als*-phrase and is understood *in addition* to the semantically odd truth-conditional denotation (i.e., for (20) to be true, the speaker has to be a bridal couple). Notably, no such oddness arises with (3). So, if the semantic oddness of (20) is the result of a semantic mismatch between the predicate contributed by the *als*-phrase and the associated referent (i.e., the speaker), the lack of semantic oddness for (3) suggests that its interpretation does not involve ascribing the property of being a bridal couple to the actual speaker—that is, (3) and (20) are not semantically equivalent.

In order to see that *ich* in (3) behaves exactly like an impersonally used personal pronoun, let us compare its behavior in (3) and (20) to that of a pronoun for which it is uncontroversial that it has an impersonal use: 2nd singular *du* ‘you’. When *ich* is exchanged for *du* in (3) and (20), we observe the same contrast in acceptability and

interpretation—both for the German examples *and* their English translations, see (22).

(22) a. **Du** kannst doch als Brautpaar nicht erwarten, dass ...

you can PRT as bridal.couple not expect that...

‘As a bridal couple, you can’t expect that...’

b. ??**DU** kannst doch als Brautpaar nicht erwarten, dass ...

you can PRT as bridal.couple not expect that...

‘As a bridal couple, YOU can’t expect that...’

Just like (3), (22a) intuitively denotes a general statement about bridal couples, and the sentence is not semantically odd even though *du* associates with *als Brautpaar* ‘as a bridal couple’. And just like (20), (22b) involves an *als*-phrase with a causal-clause-like interpretation ( $\approx$  ‘Since YOU are a bridal couple...’), which implies a general statement about bridal couples, but also makes the sentence semantically odd since being a bridal couple is directly ascribed to the singular addressee.

For 2nd singular *du* (and impersonally usable 2nd person singular pronouns of other languages), the contrast in (22) is due to the distinction between the referential use and the impersonal use of *du*. The interpretation of (22b), which contains stressed, addressee-referential *du*, arises in exactly the same way as described for (20). But, how does the generic interpretation of (22a) arise?

For impersonally interpreted *du*, the interpretation of its containing sentence involves the generic operator GEN, which underlies the intuitive interpretation of impersonal pronouns as “people in general” (see e.g., Kitagawa and Lehrer 1990; Malamud 2006, 2012, 2013; Siewierska 2004; Zobel 2014). While there is no consensus

regarding the exact semantic contribution of GEN, it is clear that GEN has intensional semantics and is, hence, a modal operator (see e.g., Krifka et al. 1995; Mari et al. 2013). As shown above, *als*-phrases do not interact with all modal operators, so before we can continue with (22a), we need to establish first that *als*-phrases can interact with GEN.

The sentence in (23) is a generic sentence with an indefinite singular subject *ein Hund* ‘a dog’ that associates with a weak free adjunct *als*-phrase *als Welpen* ‘as a puppy’.

(23) **Als Welpen** kann ein Hund seine Energie nicht kontrollieren.

as puppy can a dog his energy not control

‘As a puppy, a dog can’t control its energy.’<sup>13</sup>

Example (23) is ambiguous. One interpretation arises from the *als*-phrase getting a causal-clause-like interpretation ( $\approx$  ‘Since dogs are puppies. . .’); in this interpretation, (23) is true if dogs, in general, are puppies and is, therefore, false. The reasonable and more natural second interpretation of (23) is understood when the *als*-phrase is interpreted like a hypothetical *when*-clause ( $\approx$  ‘When dogs are puppies. . .’). This interpretation arises as a result of the *als*-phrase interacting with GEN, the only modal operator in (23).

Having established that *als*-phrases can interact with GEN, we can assume that the *als*-phrase *als Brautpaar* ‘as a bridal couple’ in (22a) can get a hypothetical conditional-clause-like interpretation. As a result, (22a) can be interpreted like a generic conditional:

(24) ‘When people are bridal couples, they can’t expect their guests to pay for the party.’

This is the interpretation for impersonally used personal pronouns I propose in Zobel 2014 and the basis for the following non-conditional paraphrase of (22a): ‘Bridal couples can’t expect their guests to pay for the party.’ No semantic oddness is expected to arise for (22a)



in this interpretation because the property ‘being a bridal couple’ is not ascribed to a single individual but to couples in the set of “people in general”.

To sum up, we have seen that the contrast observed for *ich* in (3) and (20) mirrors the contrast between (22a) and (22b), which can be attributed to the distinction between the impersonal use and the referential use of *du*. So, given this parallel between 1st singular *ich* and 2nd singular *du*, we have one further reason to assume that the general statement about bridal couples conveyed by (3) is based on an impersonal use of 1st singular *ich*.

## **5 Conclusion**

In this paper, I argued against the claim made by Ackema and Neeleman (2018) that German 1st singular *ich* ‘I’ does not and cannot have an impersonal use, and in turn provided new arguments in favor of the claim I put forth in Zobel 2014 that *ich* has an impersonal use that parallels the impersonal use of German 2nd singular *du* ‘you’.

Returning to the bigger picture, this result means that 1st person singular pronouns are *not* grammatically blocked from having impersonal uses (*pace* Ackema and Neeleman 2018), and just as for 2nd person singular pronouns, any account that connects the morphosyntax and the semantics of 1st person singular pronouns needs to accommodate the possibility that these pronouns may be used impersonally in one language or another.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup>The discourse particle *doch* often cooccurs with impersonally used *ich* but is not necessary for the impersonal interpretation to be available (see Zobel 2014:50). Since discourse particles are well-known to make no contribution to the asserted content of a clause (e.g., Grosz 2021), *doch* cannot be the source of the generic interpretation of (3).

<sup>2</sup>Generic sentences are well-known to allow for exceptions (e.g., Krifka et al. 1995; Mari et al. 2013). Hence, if the addressee A of (1b) is one of the exceptions to this rule, then “A can’t expect A’s guests to pay for A’s party” will be false. That is why it is felicitous to continue (1b) with “Well, YOU can, but people in general can’t” (where capitals encode focus; see, e.g., Kitagawa and Lehrer 1990).

<sup>3</sup>In this section, I will introduce and use A&N’s (2018) own terminology (e.g., “generic flavor”). As I point out below, however, for most of these terms it remains unclear which concepts or notions they are meant to describe.

<sup>4</sup>I report A&N’s translations and acceptability judgments as they are. My Dutch consultants do not agree with all of these judgments. Since my goal is not to discuss Dutch, I will not address these discrepancies and only point out relevant differences in footnotes.

<sup>5</sup>It is not clear to me whether (4) is fully acceptable or not. A&N say that examples of

this kind are attested, but that they find them “somewhat marked” (p. 109). My two Dutch consultants judge (4) to be semantically odd, and only marginally acceptable.

<sup>6</sup>My Dutch consultants accept both sentences in (9). So, I was not able to confirm the contrast for *jij* that motivates A&N’s introduction of imaginary guises.

<sup>7</sup>As an anonymous reviewer points out, A&N’s notion of guise might be comparable to notions that are discussed in the literature under a different name. For instance, A&N’s guises might be comparable to Fine’s (1982) *qua*-objects. Since A&N do not define their notion of guise, any further comparison would be pure speculation, though.

<sup>8</sup>The judgments reported in this and the next section reflect the judgments of 4–5 native speakers of German, as well as my own native speaker intuitions.

<sup>9</sup>URL: <<https://www.donaukurier.de/sport/lokalsport/hilpoltstein/Herrnsberg-taumelt-in-die-Kreisliga-Relegation;art1725,2425753>> (last access: July 23, 2021)

<sup>10</sup>I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this line of argumentation.

<sup>11</sup>URL: <<https://www.a4-freunde.com/forum/showthread.php?42231-8E-B6-Chip-zur-Verbrauchsreduzierung>> (last access: July 9, 2021)

<sup>12</sup>The analysis of (20) is close to A&N’s description of the Dutch counterpart of (3) in (4), which would be expected if Dutch *ik* does not have an impersonal use.

<sup>13</sup>URL: <<https://dogpackr.ch/warum-ist-mein-hund-plotzlich-so-uberdreht/>> (last access: July 1, 2021)