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## SINGULAR *de* AND ITS REFERENTIAL USE IN TALK-IN-INTERACTION

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### Abstract

The Danish pronoun *de* and its inflections are traditionally described as 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural, but, as this article demonstrates, it is also used as a gender neutral 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular pronoun. As this pronoun – termed singular *de* – has not been documented or described in the literature thus far, the purpose of this article is to provide a grammatical description and analysis of singular *de* and its referential use in interaction. This is based on 104 occurrences of singular *de* in naturally occurring conversation. It is found that singular *de* is used with both generic and specific reference, and that interlocutors may use singular *de* to avoid indexing gender and orienting to it as a relevant topic in talk-in-interaction (gender-unspecified reference) or to index the referent's gender as neither male nor female (gender-specified reference). The article also parallels between singular *de* and English singular *they*, as well as sociolinguistic variation in the use of singular *de* which could be topics for future studies.

**Keywords:** Personal pronouns, gender neutral pronouns, conversation analysis, reference, gender indexing

### 1. Introduction

Traditional accounts of pronouns typically define them as a closed word class; one that is semantically poor and rarely subject to change. However, this description does not hold up when considering how speakers use pronouns in talk-in-interaction. The pronoun class do, in fact, change and expand. This discrepancy has been addressed by e.g. Helmbrecht (2015) who points out that some of the major changes that pronouns tend to undergo have been overlooked in research. This paper is a study of one such phenomenon: Danish singular *de*. The Danish pronoun *de* and its inflections are traditionally considered 3<sup>rd</sup>

person plural, but in this paper I will demonstrate that the pronoun is also used with 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular reference, which to my knowledge has not previously been described from a linguistic perspective. The paper will, through analyses of naturally occurring conversation reveal that speakers can use singular *de* to refer to different kinds of referents while leaving the gender of the referent unspecified, in some cases as a strategy to avoid orienting to gender as a relevant topic. In other cases, singular *de* does index the gender of the referent as being of nonbinary gender, i.e. neither female nor male. As background for the analysis, section 2 outlines traditional views on pronouns in general and Danish pronouns in particular. The section also accounts for the concept of gender indexing in talk-in-interaction, introducing some principles from conversation analysis. These principles are elaborated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> section which details the method used in this paper. Section 4 accounts for the data that the analysis, which makes up sections 5 (grammatical overview) and 6 (referential use), is based on. In section 7, I propose a modified paradigm of Danish personal pronouns. The 8<sup>th</sup> and final section of the paper discusses the results and implications of the analysis, including sociolinguistic variation, parallels to English singular *they*, and other phenomena in Danish pronouns. The findings of the paper suggest that the traditional view of pronouns as a closed and semantically poor class should be questioned.

## **2. Pronouns and reference**

Pronouns are a relatively small and specialized word class, although they exhibit a large amount of cross-linguistic variation that makes them hard to clearly define as a class (Bhat 2004:1). Helmbrecht (2002:177) describe pronouns as organized in paradigms, standing in opposition to each other – they cannot be synonymous with each other and a speaker's choice of one pronoun over the other therefore has a semantic and/or pragmatic significance. Pronouns are commonly considered a closed class, (e.g. Wales 1996: 4), but phenomena such as Swedish *hen* (Sendén, Báck & Lindqvist 2015), the numerous Thai and Japanese pronouns (Panagiotidis 2002; Palakornkul 1975), and English neopronouns (Callaway 2019; Storoshenko 2019; Truong 2019) demonstrate that it is not exceedingly rare that new pronouns are introduced into languages. Simon and Wiese (2002:2) describe the pronouns class as “a borderline case” between lexical and functional categories: like lexical words, they pick out objects in the discourse, but like function words, they largely lack descriptive or semantic content. However, there is some evidence that pronouns are not necessarily semantically poor and may in some circumstances communicate information about their referents' identities (Miltersen 2016). Hansen and

Heltoft (2011:180) describe the most important function of pronouns as enabling identification of the various referents that are being talked about. For personal pronouns, this can be speech participants (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person) or referents outside the speech situation (3<sup>rd</sup> person). Pronouns may also have generic reference, where the referent of the pronoun, which may be 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 3<sup>rd</sup> person, is generalized and becomes representative of any person of a particular type:

“Characteristic of generic pronouns is that their referents are human and generalized: the descriptive reference may include the speaker, the addressee or some specific third party, but it always goes beyond that in an unspecified way (though the context of use often delimits the extension to some degree). The pronoun refers to a generalized person, and what is predicated about this referent is asserted to hold for every instantiation of the type.”

Jensen (2009:86)

1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns serve to index the roles in the speech situation, i.e. speaker and addressee (Bhat 2004:6). Consequently, almost all of the information needed to identify the referent is in the morphosemantics of the pronouns themselves.<sup>1</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns, on the other hand, denote referents not necessarily in the speech situation and are often ambiguous with regards to reference, and it is necessary to draw on discourse-pragmatic strategies to correctly identify the referent. Knowledge about the context of the speech situation, including information about the potential referents, is important in order to narrow down the choice (Simon and Weise 2002:4). Stivers, Enfield, and Levison (2007) describe three preferences that speakers adhere to when using referential expressions in talk-in-interaction: recognition (the addressee must be able to identify the referent); minimization (using as succinct an expression as possible); and association (using expressions that convey how the referent is related to the participants in the speech situation). In many languages, pronouns also play a salient role in negotiating social relations, which is particularly evident from phenomena such as T/V distinctions, honorifics and other politeness distinctions on pronouns (e.g. Brown and Gilman 1960; Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990:CH6; Panagiotidis 2002; Premawardhena 2002). These distinctions are not static, and speakers can and do modify their pronoun use in interaction in order to negotiate and communicate stance and identity (e.g. Simpson 1997; Premawardhena 2002; Raymond 2016; Conrod 2019). Considering how socially significant pronouns

can be, the characterisation of them as semantically poor might be called into question: certainly, pronouns convey a great deal of social meaning. The impact of pronoun practices is evidenced by the fact that emotional distress can be caused by transgressions, such as using the T-pronoun when the recipient feels V is appropriate, or using incorrectly gendered pronouns (MacNamara, Glann, and Durlak 2017; Conrod 2019).

### 2.1. Third person pronouns in Danish

Having given an overview of pronouns in general, the focus is now shifted to how Danish pronouns, specifically, have been described. This section draws mainly on the most prominent grammar of Danish, Hansen and Heltoft's 2011 *Grammatik over det Danske Sprog* 'Grammar of the Danish Language'.

Hansen and Heltoft (2011:181) describe the semantics of pronouns as denoting the "abstract categories" that the referents belong to, giving the example that *han* 'he' and *hun* 'she' denotes "persons" that are (usually) respectively male and female. The description of the deictic function of pronouns matches the general description in the previous section.

Pronouns are the only words in Danish that are inflected for case (Hansen and Heltoft 2011:181). Only the singular 3rd person pronouns are inflected for gender: Grammatical gender in the case of *den* 'it (common gender)' and *det* 'it (neuter gender)', and *sexus* (biological sex), in Hansen and Heltoft's terms, in the case of *hun* 'she' and *han* 'he'. Objects are typically referred to with *den/det* while the gendered pronouns *han/hun* are reserved for humans<sup>2</sup>. 1st and 2nd person are not inflected for gender, but they control common gender on adjectives and take agreement as such. All personal pronouns control number, so that singular pronouns take singular agreement on adjectives and plural pronouns take plural agreement on adjectives (Hansen and Heltoft 2011:552). Danish has several options for generic reference. One pronoun is predominantly used with generic reference, *man* (oblique: en) (Jensen 2009:86; Hansen and Heltoft 2011:556, although see Bruun 2019). Further, the pronouns *vi* (1PL), *du* (2SG) *den* (3SG common gender) and *de* (3PL, i.e. plural *de*) can also be used generically (Jensen 2009:86). Hansen and Heltoft also mention generic *du* ("inclusive *du*" in their terms, 2011:553). They also mention that traditionally, *han* is used generically<sup>3</sup>, and more recently *han eller hun* 'he or she' or simply *hun*, although they describe the latter strategy as "very marked" (2011:555).

An overview of Danish pronouns as described in the literature is provided in Table 1.

		Nominative	Oblique	Possessive/ Genitive	Reflexive
singular	1st person	jeg	mig	min / mit / mine	mig selv
	2nd person	du De (polite) <sup>4</sup>	dig Dem (polite)	din / dit / dine Deres (polite)	dig selv Dem selv (polite)
	3rd person	hun han den det man	hende ham den det én	hendes hans dens dets éns	OBL + selv sig selv
Plural	1st person	vi	os	Vores	os selv
	2nd person	I	jer	Jeres	jer selv
	3rd person	de	dem	Deres	dem selv

**Table 1:** Traditional Danish pronoun paradigm.

## 2.2. Indexing gender

In languages such as Danish and English, a major function of 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns is to index the gender of the referent. Gender in interaction has been the topic of many studies (see e.g. Stokoe 2006), and of course pronouns are not the only tool with which interlocutors index and orient to gender. Ochs (1993) differentiates between direct and indirect indexing of gender, categorizing gendered pronouns (*he*, *she*) as indirect indexes. Traditional accounts of pronouns, such as Hansen and Heltoft's (2011), have tended to assume that the choice between (binary) gendered pronouns is determined by the referent's "natural" or "biological" sex, and exclusively so. However, it is more accurate to say that speakers pick which pronoun to use based on the *conceptual* gender of the referent, i.e. the gender the speaker perceives the referent to be based on a number of social, pragmatic, and semantic factors (Ackerman 2019). Various studies have demonstrated that pronoun reference is also often not a simple binary choice between female=*she* and male=*he*. Practices of pronoun play exist where speakers will refer to men with *she* or women with *he*, and transgender and/or nonbinary individuals who fit into

neither category may be referred to with different pronouns altogether (cf. McConnel-Ginet 2013; Conrod 2019). Of course, individuals themselves also do work in a wide variety of ways to influence how their own gender is perceived by others (“performing gender”, cf. Butler 1990), e.g. by actively communicating which pronouns they wish to be referred to with (chosen pronouns). The approach of analysing gender (reference) in terms of malleable concepts rather than biological constants is a longstanding tradition in other fields of language study, including membership categorization analysis (MCA) and conversation analysis (CA) (Stokoe 2006). MCA examines how interlocutors (‘members’) assign membership of different categories to themselves and others in interaction, gender being one such collection of categories (see e.g. Schegloff 2007 and Stokoe 2006:471 for an overview). In CA, an important principle is for the analyst to only assume relevant for the participants that which the participants themselves demonstrate as being relevant. In other words, the conversation analyst first and foremost bases their arguments and conclusions on what is demonstrable in the local context of the interaction under examination, striving to avoid bringing in any assumptions or preconceptions. Consequently, “gender” as a category is only of analytical relevance when the participants orient to gender, and it is the responsibility of the researcher to demonstrate whether and how this happens in the local context (Schegloff 1992; 1997). However, the notion of “orienting to gender” locally is problematized by Stokoe and Smithson (2001), who, among other points, emphasize the need for researchers to draw on cultural context in analysing the role of gender indexing in interaction. The authors question the notion that gender is only relevant when participants orient to it. They cite Hopper and LeBaron (1998:71), who, among others, argue that gender is implicitly present in many parts of language, and that it would take effort on the part of a speaker to not index gender in their speech. As such, strategies speakers might employ to *avoid* orienting to gender (or avoid assigning gender membership to referents) can in itself be an interesting topic for analysis. Despite the limitations of CA as outlined by Stokoe and Smithson (2001), as well as later by Stokoe (2006), the authors still hold that CA can be a useful tool for gender and feminist studies, and I will employ it as such in the present paper. I argue that singular *de* is used as a device to avoid indexing and orienting to gender, which is otherwise inherently present in the Danish 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns *han* and *hun*. The next section will outline my method, including some other relevant principles of CA before proceeding to the analysis.

### 3. Method

The aim of this article is to provide a basic grammatical description of singular *de* and to analyse how it is used in various ways in talk-in-interaction. I first provide a brief overview of the grammar of singular *de* in the “classical” sense; its morphosyntax and semantics. The overview is brief because in form, singular *de* is largely identical to plural *de*, and I will focus mainly on the differences between the two. What truly sets singular *de* apart from plural *de* is its referential usage in interaction. In my analysis of this, I draw on methodology and principles from interactional linguistics and conversation analysis. In CA, analysts are interested in how participants in conversations employ and orient towards linguistic resources. Of particular interest to the grammarian, *repair* is a resource that speakers can employ when “errors, violations, troubles” or other problems in the organization of the conversation occur (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974: 39). As Stivers and Robinson (2006) demonstrate, there is a preference for progressivity in conversation, meaning that participants generally strive to continue the interactional activity they are engaged in. Repair may hinder progressivity, particularly if it is other-initiated, as in that case an entire side-sequence may be necessary to resolve the trouble. On the other hand, trouble that is not repaired may itself hinder progressivity, for instance if it renders the recipient unable to understand the utterance. In that case, repair furthers progressivity (cf. Schegloff 1979). In general, there is also a preference for self-initiation of repair (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977:375). These different preferences must be balanced in talk-in-interaction when potential trouble arises. If the issue is so severe that the different participants’ understanding of the discourse cannot be aligned, repair is necessary. Specifically for this study, such trouble may be with identifying the correct referent for instances of singular *de*. If no repair occurs at a point after an instance of singular *de* where the turn-organization otherwise allows it to be initiated, it can be assumed that the participants can identify who is being talked about. In analysing the referential usage of singular *de*, I will therefore account for whether the participants conduct repair and whether they orient towards the same referents when singular *de* is used.

In accordance with CA principles, it is also assumed for the analysis that there is “order at all points” (Sacks 1984) and that speakers’ choice of one word over another carry significance. It is also assumed that the context, both social and linguistic, in which a word or construction is uttered is crucial to the meaning and function of that word or construction. Consequently, I will treat the speakers’ choice to use singular *de* as meaningful and examine the interactional goals they may achieve by doing so.

Examples in the analysis are transcribed according to the Jefferson system (Hepburn and Bolden 2013) and key lines are glossed loosely following Leipzig glossing rules<sup>5</sup>. The next section provides an overview of the data.

#### **4. Data**

The data for the analysis consists of naturally occurring language which was searched for instances of singular *de*. 104 such instances were found, which together constitute a *collection* (Hoey and Kendrick 2017). The majority of the data consists of video recorded conversations, supplemented by a single example from a chat message exchange via a private instant messaging client. As argued in Jørgensen (2017), this type of online textual interaction carries many similarities to ‘face-to-face’ conversation, and I am therefore categorizing it as naturally occurring conversational language on line with the video-audio data and analysing it as such for the purpose of this article.

The video-audio data is part of the Danish Talk-in-Interaction project’s (DanTIN) database AULing. All data in this database are recordings of naturally occurring conversation (some of it semi-elicited, meaning that the participants were given topics or material to discuss), collected with the participants’ informed consent. I have analysed excerpts from five videos, approximately 3 hours in total. Three of the videos (titled Groups 1-3) were recorded by myself as part of an elicitation exercise designed for this article (see 4.1).

Group 1 never actually produced an instance of singular *de*, but the recording is kept in the data for comparison. Groups 2 and 3 both have examples of singular *de*, but Group 2 produced significantly more instances than Group 3, even after accounting for the longer duration of Group 2’s recording and the fact there were four participants in Group 2 as opposed to three in Group 3. This may be due to the fact that the participants in Group 2 spoke noticeably quicker than those in Group 3, consequently simply producing more speech overall. But there may also be differences between speakers as to how and how frequently singular *de* is used, which could be a topic for future studies.



Name	Duration	Date recorded	Participants	Type	Instances of singular <i>de</i>
LE14	26m	Mar. 2014	8	Study group discussion	5
venindesnak	30m	2017	2	Casual conversation	1
Group 1	35m	Jan. 2020	3	Elicited conversation	0
Group 2	1h	Jan. 2020	4	Elicited conversation	79
Group 3	35m	Jan. 2020	3	Elicited conversation	15

**Table 2:** Video-audio data overview

#### 4.1. Elicitation exercise

Part of the data are recordings of an elicitation exercise designed and conducted for the purpose of this article. The exercise aimed to elicit natural conversation that contained references to both generic and specific referents of unspecified gender, in order to facilitate opportunities to use singular *de*. To achieve this, the participants were asked to discuss short stimulus stories. The procedure is detailed below.

The participants were given five slips of paper on each of which was written a different stimulus story and instructions for the exercise. Each story revolves around one or more characters, who are never referred to with pronouns (except for the gender-unspecified reflexive *sig (selv)*), and whose gender are not otherwise indicated. One exception is the dressing room story, where the character is explicitly stated to be of nonbinary gender. The number of characters is always clear and unambiguous, so that the participants would be prompted to discuss singular referents. The five stimulus stories can be found in Appendix A, each with a title for reference in this article (the titles were not present on the paper handed out to the participants). The five titles are: the coffee story; the supermarket story; the playground story; the dressing room story; and the baptism story. The instructions for the exercise are replicated here:

*Læs historien herunder. Snak derefter om den i gruppen: Hvad er der sket? Hvem er aktørerne? Hvad kunne der ske efterfølgende? Er der et problem på spil, og hvordan kan det evt. løses?*

English translation: *Read the story below. Afterwards talk about it in your group: What has happened? Who are the actors? What could happen next? Is there a problem afoot, and how might it be solved?*

The participants were told to discuss the stories and use the instructions as guidelines, but not worry too much about adhering to them strictly. This was done to ensure that the conversation elicited would be as natural as possible. Each group was given roughly 30 minutes in total to discuss all five stories. One group (Group 2) was given the additional task of discussing the party game *Werewolf* after they had completed the case story task. They were asked to explain the rules of the game to each other and discuss more generally how to play the game. The group spent an additional 30 minutes on this task. The other two groups did not receive this task due to time restrictions.

### 5. Grammatical overview of singular *de*

Before the referential use of singular *de* is analysed, an overview of its morphosyntax is given in this section. Morphologically, singular *de* and plural *de* are identical. The two are distinguished from each other by their syntactic surroundings and discursive context. Singular *de* is defined as referring to a singular referent, by coindexing with an antecedent or postcedent marked for singular (either on the NP itself or on a predicate), and/or by it being clear from the discursive context that its referent is a single person. (1) is an example of *de* being coindexed with the singular antecedent *en eller anden* ('someone or other'), which is also predicated by an adjective in singular form in a relative clause (*der er homoseksuel* 'who is homosexual') (coindexing marked with subscript *i*, and relevant constituents marked with square brackets):

#### (1) Group 3 | 23:30

elle:r [en eller anden]<sub>i</sub> der er homoseksuel å synes det er rigtig  
or one or another REL is homosexual and think it is really  
træls fordi de<sub>i</sub> bliver mobbet  
upsetting because they become.PRS bullied  
'o:r someone who is homosexual and thinks it's really upsetting  
because they are being bullied'

In some cases, the syntactic environment is such that the reference is ambiguous between singular and plural, but the discursive context makes it clear that it is an instance of singular *de*. Take for instance example (2):

#### (2) Group 2 | 41:25

de<sub>i</sub> kunne sån være (0.2) rigtig seje å (.) lave deres<sub>i</sub> e:iget  
they could such be really tough.PL and make their own

kort<sup>↗</sup>  
 card  
 ‘they could like be (0.2) really cool and (.) make their o:wn  
 card’

From the example alone, there is no sign that the referent here is a singular person. The only deictic elements are *de* and *deres* with no nearby antecedent, and *de* is even predicated by an adjective marked for plural (*seje*) (cf. section 5.1). In terms of form, this instance of *de* behaves entirely as a plural pronoun. The context of the utterance, however, makes it clear that the referent is singular: Group 2 is discussing the baptism story and have just finished addressing what difficulties there might be in finding a sufficiently varied selection of greeting cards. Immediately before the excerpt, they are reorienting to the instructions for the experiment: One of the participants reads aloud *hvad kunne der ske efterfølgende* (‘what could happen afterwards’). Then another participant repeats *hvad kunne der ske efterfølgende* and produces (2). Since the group’s earlier discussion of the story has revolved around the (single) main character’s behaviour and motivations, and they are now returning to talk about specifically what is transpiring in the story, the only coherent referent for *de* in (2) is that main character, thereby making it an instance of singular *de*.

Having presented some examples of singular *de* and accounted for how it can be distinguished from plural *de* in context, a full overview of the pronoun’s case inflections, with examples from data, is given in Table 3.

	Form	Example
Nominative	de [d̥i]	<i>jaer å så kan man lige aftale med en eller anden at de (.) henter den for en sån at man ikke skal op af trappen</i> <sup>↗</sup> ‘yeah and then you can make a deal with someone that they (.) will get it for you so that you don’t have to go up the stairs’ (Group 3, 15:05)
Oblique	dem [d̥em]	<i>*æh* alternativt så kunne det være at sige at det har være:t hvem end der ha:r serveret dem kaffen (0.5) hvis de nu har distraheret dem på &gt;en eller anden&lt; måde</i> ‘*eh* alternatively it could be saying that it was whoever served them the coffee (0.5) if they have distracted them somehow’ (Group 2, 2:21)

<b>Poss./Gen.</b>	deres [d̥æʁs]	<p>det også- det <b>deres</b> job (0.5) de (.) de gårdvagt</p> <p>‘it’s also- it’s their job (0.5) they (.) they’re on playground duty’          (Group 2, 28:10)</p>
<b>Reflexive</b>	sig selv [sai 'sælʔ] / dem selv [dem 'sælʔ]	<p>(...) hvor de står og s- khælder kogende kaffe ud over <b>sig selv</b> for det gør pænt nas↘</p> <p>‘(...) where they are standing and s- kpouring boiling coffee over [REFL] because that stings pretty bad’          (Group 2 3:29)</p> <p>førsteprioriteten må være å skynde sig hen ti:l en vask hh øh: å så ka v-  <b>så</b> må de så overveje med <b>dem selv</b> om de har lyst til å få en ny kop kaffe eller at de er vågen ri:geligt↘</p> <p>‘first priority must be to hurry to: a sink hh uh: then can v- then they must consider with [REFL] if they want to get a new cup of coffee or if they’re plenty awake’          (Group 2, 4:00)</p>

**Table 3:** Case paradigm.

### 5.1. Adjectival agreement

The data contains examples of *de* predicated by adjectives, and these adjectives occur both in singular and plural form. The two following examples are from the same conversation and illustrates both cases, (3) being an example of singular agreement and (4) an example of plural agreement:

(3) Group 2 | 19:27

- 01 \*DAN: jeg har sån en go to strategi hvis jeg er varulv→  
 I have like a go to strategy if I am werewolf
- 02 \*DAN: det sån .hh hvis en person (0.2) anklager en eller  
 it's like hh if a person (0.2) accuses someone or  
 anden→  
 other
- 03 \*ALF: jaer↘=  
 yeah
- 04 \*DAN: = for et eller andet (0.3) ø:hm så: slå den  
 = for something or other (0.3) u:hm the:n kill that  
 person ihjel som de  
 person that they
- 05 → \*DAN: anklagede (.) hvis det er du du du ved  
 accuse.PST if it is you you you know  
 de er god altså [hvis  
 they.SG be.PRS good PRT if  
 accused (.) if it is you you you know they are good  
 that is if=

06 \*BOB: [hm  
07 \*DAN: [en god person anklager en anden god person for et  
eller andet→  
a good person accuses another good person for  
something or other

(4) Group 2 | 34:36

01 \*CAL: vi had- vi had- vi havde en øh: der øh: der ikke ville  
gøre det fordi  
we had- we had- we had one uh: who uh: who did not  
want to do it because  
02 → \*CAL: at øh: de øh: som- som også sagde at de  
CONJ they.SG REL REL also say.PST CONJ they.SG  
var utilpasse  
be.PST uncomfortable.PL  
that uh: they: uh: who- who also said that they were  
uncomfortable

Atypical agreement in subject predicates has been attested in Danish for agreement with prepositional objects (Jensen 2004; Engberg-Pedersen and Poulsen 2010, Christensen and Nyvad 2019). A singular subject and a plural object compete for agreement on the adjective, such as in (5) (adapted from Christensen & Nyvad 2019:167 example 6c):

(5) Jeg nåede at have to, men jeg var ikke **gode** ved dem, så de  
I reach.PST INF have two but I was not good.PL PP them so they  
blev ikke så gamle.  
become.PST not so old.PL  
'I had two in that time, but I was not good to them, so they did not  
grow very old'

Christensen and Nyvad (2019:170) hypothesize that the phenomenon may be a case of trigger-happy agreement as described by Comrie (2003:319) where more than one NP can control agreement, depending on syntactic and pragmatic properties.

While a similar “battle” is going on at the surface (singular or plural agreement), the situation for singular *de* is a little different. Here, there is only one candidate for agreement controller, *de*, the issue rather being that the form itself is ambiguous between singular *de* and plural *de*. Whether the result is singular or plural agreement depends on a balancing of syntactic and pragmatic/discursive factors.

Examples like (3) and (4) are scattered throughout the video data, neither one nor the other being overwhelmingly more frequent: There are four

instances of plural agreement, three instances of singular agreement, and two instances where the plural and singular form of the adjective are homophones. The participants never treat either form as more marked than the other, and the presence of plural agreement does not seem to have consequences for their ability to identify the referent or comprehend the utterance. If singular *de* is a relatively new phenomenon, the fact that neither form is dominant may be due to singular *de* having yet to stabilize as a lexeme with its own number specification separate from plural *de*.

## 6. Referential usage

Having given an overview of the grammatical form and behaviour of singular *de*, I now turn to examining the way singular *de* is used in talk-in-interaction. I argue that singular *de* can be used referentially in, broadly defined, three ways. Rather than this division being a strict taxonomy, it should be seen as a tool to provide an overview of and characterize the way in which singular *de* is used in interaction. For the present purpose, the different uses of singular *de* are defined in terms of the kind of referents they refer to. Namely, referents that are:

1. Generic gender-unspecified,
2. specific gender-unspecified, or
3. specific gender-specified.

Of these, 1) has generic reference, while 2) and 3) have deictic reference, i.e. singular *de* in these cases refers to concrete referents in the discourse. By “gender-unspecified”, it is meant that the pronoun does not index the gender of the referent, whereas “gender-specified” use of singular *de* indexes the referent’s gender as specifically gender neutral or nonbinary. The next sections will further explain and give examples of the three referential uses, showing how speakers use them to achieve interactional goals. Specifically, I argue that singular *de* is used by speakers both to orient to gender and to avoid doing so, in the latter case to downplay the relevance and importance of gender, and/or to maintain discretion and anonymity.

### 6.1. Generic gender-unspecified referent

As mentioned in section 2, plural *de* can have generic use in Danish (Jensen 2009:4), similarly to plural *they* in English and plural *ze* in Dutch (de Hoop & Tarenskeen 2015:164). However, generic plural *de* would be used for generic referents that are plural or at least unspecified for number, while the examples from my data feature referents that are unambiguously singular. These

referents can be seen as hypothetical persons that are thought up to illustrate a point or represent a more abstract category of referents. To fit that purpose, they are unspecified for any feature or semantic content that is not necessary to make the point in question. An example is seen in (6), which is from a study group discussion with eight participants. The group is discussing ethics in the workplace, specifically the issue of confidentiality between a hairdresser and customer:

(6) LE14 | 9:50

- 01 \*H: asså (.) >det handler jo< om relationen mellem kunde  
 å å å frisør  
 well (.) it's about the relation between customer  
 and and and customer
- 02 \*H: (.) om man vælger å prøve å (1.1) lære så meget om  
 kunden som muligt  
 if one chooses to try and (1.1) learn as much about  
 the customer as possible
- 03 \*H: at det er kunden der skal snakke eller (0.2) \*å-\* altså  
 that it is the customer who shall talk or (0.2) a- well
- 04 → \*H: komme til at kend[e dem eller om man lader  
 come PP INF know them.SG or PP one lets  
 kunden komme til at  
 customer.DEF come PP INF  
 get to know them or if one lets the customer get to
- 05 \*E: [ah (.) mm
- 06 \*H: kende sig selv→  
 know themself
- 07 \*E: hm↘
- 08 \*H: hh fordi i virkeligheden kan man komme til å fortælle  
 (0.2) ret  
 hh because in reality one can accidentally tell  
 (0.2) quite
- 09 \*H: mange ting (.) ti:l en frisør so:m man egentlig ikke  
 kender→  
 many things (.) to: a hairdresser tha:t one really  
 doesn't know
- 10 \*H: asså→  
 I mean
- 11 \*E: hm↘
- 12 \*C: jaer [(nej)↘  
 yeah no
- 13 \*H: [hvor man føler at man overhovedet ikke ved  
 noget om deres liv↘  
 where one feels that one doesn't know  
 anything at all about their life

In line 01, H is saying that the core concern is “the relation between customer and hairdresser”. The bare nouns *kunde* and *frisør*, devoid of any (in)

definiteness markers, suggest that H is referring to the (generic) categories of customer and hairdresser, rather than any specific customer or hairdresser (cf. Hansen and Heltoft 2011:473). Based on this, it could be argued that the referents are not truly singular, as referring to a category of people may be semantically more similar to referring to multiple people than referring to a single person. However, H uses singular markers to describe the referents: the singular definiteness suffix *-en* (lines 02-04), and the singular article *en* (line 09). Morphosyntactically, H treats the referents as singular, and these instances of *de* are therefore interpretable as singular *de*. The referents are imagined, exemplifying entities, and thereby generic, and H uses gender-unspecified singular *de* to emphasize this genericity.

Initially, in line 02, H refers to the hairdresser with the pronoun *man*, and to the customer with singular *de*. In H's next turn in line 08, this reference strategy is reversed, and H now refers to the hairdresser with *de* and to the customer with *man*. As both are referred to with *man*, they must both play a generic role in this discourse. Consequently, since *de* as well is used to refer to both persons, *de* must also be able to denote generic referents in a similar fashion as *man*. Note that referential scopes of the two pronouns are not identical: where *man* can be taken to include the speaker, *de* cannot. By switching between *man* and *de*, H is able to provide a more nuanced account of the (hypothetical) situation, where the perspectives of both customer and hairdresser are presented. First H takes the perspective of the hairdresser interacting with the customer, describing possible strategies that the hairdresser could employ in managing the relation (namely whether the hairdresser should “get to know” the customer or help the customer gain self-insight (*lader kunden komme til at kende sig selv* ‘let the customer get to know themselves’)). Afterwards, H takes on the perspective of the customer, saying that a customer risks oversharing and may feel that the relation is unequal (*hvor man føler at man overhovedet ikke ved noget om deres liv* ‘where one feels that one does not at all know anything about their life’). Whoever functions as the point-of-view of H's telling is referred to with *man*, and the other is referred to with *de*, while both remain generic referents.

## 6.2. Specific gender-unspecified referent

Singular *de* can also refer to specific referents that for one reason or other are unspecified for gender. This section will examine examples with referents that are 1) fictional, 2) real and unknown to the speaker, and 3) real and known to the speaker. These three uses are grouped together as they linguistically are treated the same – as specific referents – but they point to quite different



kinds of entities in the real world in terms of what knowledge the speakers have access to. For the fictional referent in the first example, the speakers have very little knowledge about the person – and in fact, there exists no knowledge about e.g. the gender, as it is not specified or described anywhere. In the second example, the referent is a real person and therefore knowledge about e.g. their gender does exist, but the speaker has not been privy to that information and therefore does not have access to it. In the third pair of examples, the referent is also real, and here the speaker does have knowledge about the referent’s identity, including gender, but chooses not to draw on that information and leaves it unspecified by using singular *de*. These three uses are analysed more closely in turn below, where it is also demonstrated that they allow the speakers to achieve different interactional goals: In the cases where the speaker has insufficient knowledge about the referent (fictional, real and unknown), the speaker can use singular *de* to avoid indexing gender and thereby avoid making an epistemic claim that cannot be justified. Where the speaker does have knowledge about the referent’s gender (real and known), the speaker can choose to use gender-unspecified singular *de* and avoid indexing gender in order to downplay the importance of gender or to emphasize the anonymity of the referent.

### 6.2.1. Fictional

In (7), Group 2 are discussing the first case story in the exercise. DAN has read the coffee story aloud and proceeds to address the instructions in line 08, initiating a discussion of what has happened in the story:

(7) Group 2 | 1:20

- 01 \*DAN: okay (.) ø:hm: (.) å så de:r >nogen ting vi skal  
 snakke om< så hva-  
 okay (.) u:hm (.) and then the:re’s some things we  
 should talk about so wha-
- 02 \*DAN: HVA der sket>  
 WHAT has happened
- 03 (0.3)
- 04 \*DAN: ø:h→  
 u:h
- 05 (0.2)
- 06 → \*CAL: de har skyndet sig virkelig meget for å:  
 3SG have hurry.PST REFL truly much PP INF  
 they have hurried a whole lot to:
- 07 \*CAL: prøve å komme [hen til deres undervisning  
 try INF come ADV PP 3SG.POSS teaching  
 til tiden>  
 PP time.DEF  
 try to get to their class on time

- 08 \*BOB: [phh  
 09 \*BOB: \*e:\*e:j det kunne også bare være du ved den de:r (.)  
 den typiske  
 a:h it could also just be you know tha:t (.) the typical  
 10 \*BOB: morgen du ved hvor du ba:re sån rigtig træet du ved å  
 [\*så:\*→  
 morning you know where you j:ust like really tired you  
 know and then  
 11 \*DAN: [ja:↘  
 yes

After a few pauses and an *uhm* from DAN, CAL gives his account of what has happened in the case story in line 06: *de har skyndet sig virkelig meget for å: prøve å komme hen til deres undervisning til tiden* ('they have hurried a whole lot to try and get to their class on time'). CAL refers explicitly to the character in the story, denoting the person with singular *de*. As the character is fictional and the story does not specify a gender, there is nothing that can indicate which pronoun is appropriate to use. Therefore, CAL can use singular *de* to avoid taking a stance on or guessing at which gender the person might be, information that is both unknown and irrelevant to the story at hand.

### 6.2.2. Real, unknown to speaker

In the study group data, participant H relays a story originally told by someone else. A hairdresser informant has been talking to H about confidentiality between her and her customers, and immediately before the excerpt in (8), H has described how a client has told the hairdresser about a mental health issue:

(8) LE14 | 11:20

- 01 \*H: fordi (.) nogen gange så kan det være rigtig svært at  
 snakke om  
 because (.) sometimes then it can be really hard to  
 talk about  
 02 \*H: personlige (0.2) ting (.) med mennesker man kender↗  
 personal (0.2) things (.) with people you know  
 03 \*H: nogen gange kan det være en utrolig lettelse at  
 fortælle [det til  
 sometimes it can be an incredible relief to tell it to  
 04 \*B: [jaer  
 yeah  
 05 \*H: nogen som man ikke kender [rigtigt↘  
 someone who you don't know really  
 06 \*B: [mm  
 07 (0.3)  
 08 \*H: å altså (.) som hun selv sagde >hvem skulle hun< sige  
 det til hun kendte  
 and well (.) like she said herself who should she tell  
 it to she didn't know

- 09 \*H: jo ikke (0.5)[klientens familie å: asså: å hun- hun  
var altid sådan øhm  
(0.5) the client's family and well: and she- she was  
always like uhm
- 10 (0.7)
- 11 \*H: altså  
well
- 12 → \*H: hun anonymiserede dem i bedste se a stil hun sagde  
3SG anonymise.PST 3SG PP best C A style 3SG said  
**bare** (0.2) en af  
just one PP  
she anonymised them in the best CA fashion she just  
said (0.2) one of my
- 13 \*H: mine klienter (.) jeg havde den her oplevelse(.) asså  
my client.PL 1SG have.PST it here experience PRT  
clients (.) I had this experience (.) I mean
- 14 (0.2)
- 15 \*H: det var aldrig sådan hun udstillede [dem det var  
it was never such 3SG expose.PST 3SG it be.PST  
hun meget omhyggelig med→  
3SG very careful PP  
it was never like she exposed them she was very  
careful about that
- 16 \*A: [jaer (.) lige præcis→  
yeah (.) exactly

The hairdresser's story involves one of her clients sharing some sensitive information about the client's mental health with her. In line 18, H points out that the hairdresser competently kept her client anonymous (*hun anonymiserede dem i bedste CA stil* 'she anonymized them in best CA fashion'). Doing this, H refers to the client with singular *de*. In contrast, H refers to the hairdresser with *hun* 'she'. In other words, it is not the case that H avoids orienting to gender entirely, but rather indexes gender in the hairdresser but not in the client. This could be due to H not knowing the gender of the referent (i.e. the hairdresser did not reveal this information), in which case H is avoiding indexing the referent's gender for the same reason as CAL did in example (7). On the other hand, it might be that H does know the client's gender, but chooses to leave it unspecified here. H might be doing this to avoid orienting to gender in order to downplay its importance – however, the fact that H does index the hairdresser's gender with *hun* suggests otherwise. Alternatively, H may be using singular *de* about the client to emphasize the client's anonymity. Not only is H relaying sensitive personal information about this person, but unlike the hairdresser, the client may not have given consent to or even have knowledge of the fact that they are being discussed as part of an academic study. By keeping the client as underspecified as possible, H can distance them

as a person from the discourse and keep focus on the topic of confidentiality between hairdresser and customer.<sup>6</sup>

### 6.2.3. Real, known to speaker

While in (8), the speaker (likely) did not know the referent nor many details about them, the speakers in the next examples are aware of precisely who the referent is and presumably of their gender, but still refer to them with unspecified singular *de*. In the first example (9), two friends are discussing who will be attending a board game event the following day:

(9) venindesnak | 22:55

- 01 \*ADA: ø:hm: (.) indtil jeg jo selvfølgelig kom i tanke om at  
der er  
u:hm: (.) until I of course remembered that there is  
02 spilaften i mo:rgen→  
board game night tomorrow  
03 (0.9)  
04 \*BEA: \*j[a\*↘  
yes  
05 \*ADA: [ >og så kom jeg< til å tjekke begivenheden↘  
and then I accidentally checked the event  
06 (1.4)  
07 → \*ADA: °åghh så der nogen der har trykket de måske  
ugh then there someone REL have pressed 3SG maybe  
kommer (.) åghh °↘  
come.PRS ugh  
ughh then there's someone who has clicked they might  
come ughh  
08 (1.2)  
09 \*BEA: fuck det↘  
fuck that  
10 \*ADA: åghh↘  
ughh  
11 \*BEA: fuck dem↘  
fuck them  
12 \*ADA: jaer↘  
yeah  
13 (1.4)  
14 → \*ADA: øh: de ikke i flertal↘  
uh 3SG not PP plural  
uh: they isn't plural  
15 \*ADA: de(t) er nummer et↘  
it's number one  
16 (0.6)  
17 \*BEA: thm↘  
18 \*ADA: \*det er kun en\*↘  
it's just one  
19 (0.8)

- 20 \*BEA: jaer (.) fint  
yeah (.) fine
- 21 \*ADA: jaer og det kan jeg også bedre håndtere (.) tog sti:ne  
kommer i  
yeah and I can better handle that too (.) and sti:ne  
will come
- 22 morgen og det bliver godt  
tomorrow and it will be good
- 23 \*BEA: tnå ja for fanden hun skal også med til spilafte  
oh right hell she is also going to board game night

In line 05, ADA says that she looked at the social media page for the board game night, using the phrasing *kom til* (lit. ‘came to’), indicating that ideally, she should not have done it. This is followed by a relatively long pause of 1.4 seconds – this, together with the *kom til* phrasing, could signal that ADA is about to talk about something bad or problematic<sup>7</sup>. This is further supported by the groans surrounding ADA’s utterance in line 07, where she says that *nogen* ‘somebody’ (which can be interpreted as either singular or plural) has indicated on social media that “they may attend” the event (*de måske kommer*). Since ADA has seen this on the social media page for the event, she has presumably been able to see the identity of the person there as well. The negative framing of the utterance could indicate that she is unhappy with the fact that this person may or may not show up. This suggests that ADA has enough knowledge about this person to know which pronoun they are normally referred to with, which could be *de*, but could also be *han* or *hun*. But the way the person is also indexed with *nogen* rather than mentioned by name suggests that they are in fact underspecified here. Following this utterance is another long pause (1.2 seconds), where ADA could elaborate (e.g. specifying who *de* refers to) – the fact that BEA does not take the turn here indicates that the story is potentially pragmatically incomplete and BEA could be waiting for a continuation or clarification. No such thing is provided, and BEA then addresses the information as given and aligns with ADA’s negative judgement, saying “fuck that” and then “fuck them”, following ADA’s choice of pronoun. To the outside observer, at this point it is still ambiguous whether BEA has correctly identified the referent of *de* – the long pause in 08 could also indicate that BEA is having trouble doing so. In fact, this may also be ambiguous to ADA, as she, once the alignment sequence in 09-12 is complete, initiates self-repair in order to disambiguate the referent. She specifies that *de* indeed refers to only one person, saying *øh: de ikke i flertal* (‘uh they [COP] not plural’). BEA accepts ADA’s repair at face value with *hm* in line 17 and *jaer (.) fint* in line 20. ADA’s utterance in line 21 then further disambiguates and also addresses the trouble at hand. ADA says that she “can better handle

that” (*det kan jeg også bedre håndtere*), in contrast to it being harder to handle not knowing whether several people will attend or not.

This is the only example of a speaker repairing an utterance containing singular *de* present in my data (and it is worth noting that it is not initiated by the person who does not already know the identity of the referent, the recipient). Here, the use of singular *de* as opposed to an unambiguously singular pronoun hinders the conversation from progressing, requiring long pauses and a repair sequence, so what might ADA gain from using singular *de* anyway? As in the previous example, the purpose here may be to keep the referent as anonymous as possible. Since ADA’s negative framing of the utterance in 07 indicates that she might be upset with this person, keeping their identity hidden from BEA may be a way to prevent conflict if all three (ADA, BEA, and the anonymous person) are part of the same social circle and BEA might be able to identify them and also become upset with them on ADA’s behalf. Using a gender-specific pronoun would narrow down the list of possible referents. ADA could have specified the identity of the referent in line 08, but did not, and the use of singular *de* here may be a way to further indicate that she will not reveal who the person is.

Another example of using singular *de* about a known referent is (10), where Group 2 is discussing the playground story. This prompts CAL to share a story from his own school days:

(10) Group 2 | 26:35

- 01 \*CAL: men på den anden side det er ude i gården fordi det er en gårdvagt så  
but on the other hand it is in the yard because it is a yard guard so
- 02 det nok ikke fordi at de:r ikke er [( )]  
it’s probably not because the:re is not [unintelligible]
- 03 \*BOB: [nå ja en gårdvagt det var  
oh yeah a yard guard that was
- 04 en ting ja  
a thing yes
- 05 \*CAL: ja  
yes
- 06 \*CAL: det er det sikkert stadig  
it probably still is
- 07 \*ALF: det tror jeg  
I think so
- 08 \*BOB: det lyder plausibelt  
it sounds plausible
- 09 \*CAL: altså det havde vi da brug for der var da folk der kom meget til  
well we needed that because there were people who got very

- 10 skade bare hhfordi de var idioter  
hurt just hhbecause they were idiots
- 11 → \*CAL: vi havde nogen der faldt ned fra en container og rev  
1PL had someone REL fell down from a container and tear.PST  
deres øh: pung op  
3SG pouch up  
we had someone who fell down from a container and tore  
open their uh: pouch
- 12 (0.8)
- 13 \*CAL: \*det var ikke så [gødt\*  
that was not so good
- 14 \*BOB: [<så må man jo hellere købe en ny en>  
then you better buy a new one
- 15 \*BOB: hh
- 16 \*ALF: he
- 17 \*CAL: lad os bare sige at det var ikke særligt kønt sån at  
kunne se sån en  
let us just say that it was not very pretty like being  
able to see like a
- 18 lille (0.2) <klump> der lige lå å var blodig nede på  
jorden ved  
little (0.2) lump that just lay and was bloody down  
on the ground
- 19 siden af dem  
next to them

When the transcript starts, the group has just remembered that one of the characters in the stimulus story is a teacher on playground duty (*gårdvagt* ‘yard guard’). In line 06, CAL makes the claim that playground duty is probably still something that is practiced in schools, which ALF and BOB agree with in the next two lines. Then CAL initiates his story by saying that surely “we [he and his childhood classmates] needed that” (*det havde vi da brug for*), backing up this claim by telling a story about a pupil, referred to with singular *de*. CAL relays that the pupil fell off a shipping container and “*rev deres pung op*” ‘ripped open their [genital] pouch’. This is met with 0.8 seconds of silence, which could be due to the sensitive nature of the topic introduced (genital injury), or perhaps indicate that the other participants are having trouble disambiguating the word *pung*, which can mean either genital pouch or wallet. CAL then makes an assessment of his own story *\*det var ikke så godt\** ‘that wasn’t so good’. This is said in a softer voice, which again could indicate the sensitivity of the topic. Before CAL has finished his utterance, BOB makes a joke on the ambiguity of *pung*, commenting that ‘then you better buy a new one’ (*så må man jo hellere købe en ny en*). This elicits some laughing, but CAL promptly disambiguates the word in lines 17-19 by adding a detail to the story about a “small bloody lump” lying “next to [the pupil]” (*sån en lille (0.2) klump der lige lå å var blodig nede på jorden ved siden af dem*) after the event.

Like in (9), here the referent of singular *de* is known to the speaker, but slightly more detail is revealed about them in CAL's story than was the case in the previous example. So far this article has shown that singular *de* may be used about referents that are unspecified for gender - interestingly though, one of the only details revealed about the referent in CAL's story has to do with something that is often associated with or taken to be indicative of someone's gender, namely genitals.<sup>8</sup> CAL's use of *de* here may be a way of indicating that gender is not relevant to the discussion, even when other elements in the discourse makes it available as such. Additionally, like in the previous examples, it may be a distal usage in order to maintain discretion due to the sensitive topic.

### 6.3. Specific specified referent

Finally, singular *de* may be used in the same way *hun* and *han* typically are: In this third use, singular *de* is used specifically about referents who wish to be referred to that way. For instance, the referent may be nonbinary, in which case the pronoun specifies the referent's gender as nonbinary.<sup>9</sup> Examples of this are not present in my video data, but (11) is an example from a private instant messaging conversation. Aska and Birke share an acquaintance, Charly, whose chosen pronoun is *de*. In the excerpt, Aska has just encountered some content online related to an interest of Charly's, which she takes a screenshot of and sends it to Birke via a chat client:

- (11) Aska: [image]  
Aska: Jeg har ikke snakket med Charly siden vi mødte **dem**, men  
1SG have not talk.PST.PRT with Charly since we meet.PST 3SG but  
jeg har det som om **de** skal se det her  
1SG have.PRS it as if 3SG shall see it here  
'I haven't talked to Charly since we met them, but I feel like  
they should see this'  
Birke: Jeg kan sige af erfaring at det er helt legitimt at sende Charly  
1SG can say PP experience CONJ it is whole legitimate INF send Charly  
ting ud af det blå  
thing.PL PP PP the blue  
'I can say from experience that it's totally allowed to send  
Charly things out of the blue'

Aska and Birke both mention Charly's name, making it clear that they are talking about a specific referent. They are aware both of Charly's chosen pronouns and of Charly's gender. The use of singular *de* here, as opposed



to the earlier examples, is therefore not a strategy for avoiding orienting to gender, but rather picks out a unique referent with the most specific pronoun available.

#### 6.4. Negotiating gender indexing

The previous sections have demonstrated that using singular *de* is an effective strategy for referring to referents while keeping their gender unspecified, whether because the gender is unknown or irrelevant, or as a means of protecting the referent's identity. As far as can be inferred from the data, all participants in the conversations are able to both produce and comprehend singular *de*. Repair is rarely initiated, and instead continuation markers such as *ja, jaer* 'yes, yeah' and *hm, mm* are produced in repair-relevant positions. In some cases, however, the participants may switch between different reference strategies and may sometimes not align with each other's strategies. In all three experiment groups (including the group that did not produce singular *de* at all), participants frequently use different pronouns in reference to the same referent, switching between singular *de, man* or *en, du, vedkommende* ('the one concerning'), *jeg, den, han, hun, han eller hun* between and even within turns. They also sometimes forego pronouns altogether, opting instead for other strategies such as referring to the character with a noun (*personen, barnet, det menneske* 'the person, the child, that human'). In some of the cases, this mixing of strategies can be seen as a negotiation of whether and how to index gender in the interaction. An example of this is shown in (12). In the excerpt, Group 2 is discussing the baptism story.<sup>10</sup> They have been talking about what might happen next, to which CAL has suggested that the character can make a homemade card to bring to the baptism. CAL has consistently referred to the character using singular *de*. ALF then raises a potential issue for choosing which kind of card to bring:

- (12) Group 2 | 42:11
- 01 \*ALF: de:r også øh:: (.) mulighed for bare a: (.) han ved  
jo ikke hvad  
the:re's also uh:: (.) the possibility just tha:t (.)  
he doesn't know what
- 02 \*ALF: køn barnet er lyder det som om (.) det sån jeg  
[forstod det  
gender the child is it sounds like (.) that's how I  
understood it
- 03 \*CAL: [vdjøh:→
- 04 \*DAN: tmm→
- 05 \*ALF: så han [kunne-  
so he could

- 06 \*DAN: [†DET KAN GØDT VÆRE at de- han=  
IT MIGHT BE that they- he
- 07 \*CAL: =det kan godt være de bare gerne ville: [gøre noget  
andet→  
it might be that they just wanted to do something  
else
- 08 \*DAN: [øh: de bare e:r  
uh: they a:re just
- 09 frustreret over at øh: [(.) ting er så kønnet→  
frustrated that uh: things are so gendered
- 10 \*CAL: [°jep°→  
yup
- 11 \*ALF: ja→  
yes
- 12 \*DAN: øhm:→  
uhm:
- 13 \*ALF: men det kan jo være han- han kunne jo bare tage en  
gamble jo å så  
but it might be he- he could just take a gamble and then
- 14 \*ALF: bare tage en af dem å så (.) se om det var rigtigt→  
just take one of them and then (.) see if it was right  
(0.5)
- 15
- 16 \*CAL: ·hh øh:m [bz:::→
- 17 \*BOB: [jeg tror ikke det er det [der→  
I don't think that that is what
- 18 \*CAL: [det tror- jeg tror ikke det det  
that think- I don't think that that
- 19 \*CAL: der er problemet→  
is what the problem is

In lines 01-02, ALF presents his interpretation of the story, namely that the main character does not know the gender of the child being baptized. In doing so, ALF refers to the character with the pronoun *han* 'he', categorizing the character as male. ALF's interpretation is met with a doubtful *vdjoh* 'uh' from CAL in line 03, although he does not yet follow up on this potential objection. Instead, DAN responds in lines 06 and 08-09 that the character might just be "frustrated that things are so gendered", and doing so, he rejects ALF's interpretation of what the conflict of the story is about. While in line 06, DAN's utterance is still unfinished and thus not unambiguously a rejection yet, he both interrupts ALF's utterance in 05 and raises his voice, which might signal that he's about to disagree with what has been said. As Sacks (1992:308) observes, the different parts of a conversation are "invariably relevant", and a turn necessarily addresses the previous turn. Since ALF has referred to the main character with *han*, while CAL has earlier referred to that same referent with *de*, DAN is now forced to decide whether to follow one or the other of these two strategies (or introduce a third one). Initially, he does not adopt

ALF's choice of pronoun, referring to the character with singular *de* instead, but immediately after restarts and says *han*, conforming to ALF's strategy. Before DAN can continue, CAL takes the floor again, suggesting that the character "*bare gerne ville gøre noget andet*" ('just wanted to do something different'), using singular *de* as he has been doing before, thereby avoiding taking a stance on the character's gender. With this utterance, he not only rejects ALF's reference strategy, but also his interpretation of the story's conflict, siding with DAN instead. If DAN's switching between *han* and *de* in line 06 is interpreted as him being conflicted as to whether to adopt ALF's or CAL's choice of pronouns, CAL's siding with his interpretation of the story might prompt him to also use CAL's reference strategy, which he does in line 08, referring to the main character with *de*.

At this point, ALF could switch reference strategy now that *de* is supported by two other participants, but the negotiation does not end here. Furthermore, the group also has not yet agreed on an interpretation of the story. In line 11, ALF says *ja* 'yes', which in this case is not a sign of agreement, but rather ALF acknowledging the argument that CAL and DAN has made before continuing in line 13 with a different suggestion: That the main character could "gamble" and pick a card at random. He thereby reiterates his interpretation that the main character does not know the gender of the baby, while continuing his reference strategy of referring to the character with *han*. After a relatively long pause of 0.5 seconds, both BOB and CAL once again reject ALF's interpretation. As a result, a contrast is made not only between ALF's versus CAL and DAN's referential strategies and (avoiding) orienting to gender, but also between their interpretations of the story.

### **7. Modified pronoun paradigm**

Section 6 has demonstrated that singular *de* is used consistently in interactional Danish. It may be used both when the gender of the referent is unknown to the speaker, and when the speaker does know the gender of the referent but chooses not to specify it in that utterance. While there is some instability with regards to agreement, this is not something that hinders its functioning in context and in this it does not differ from other cases of atypical agreement in Danish (cf. section 5.1). Based on these observations, I propose a modified version of the paradigm of Danish pronouns as presented in Table 1, shown as Table 4.

		Nominative	Oblique	Genitive	Reflexive
<b>singular</b>	<b>1st person</b>	jeg	mig	min / mit / mine	mig selv
	<b>2nd person</b>	du De (polite)	dig Dem (polite)	din / dit / dine Deres (polite)	dig selv Dem selv (polite)
	<b>3rd person</b>	hun han <b>de</b> den det man	hende ham <b>dem</b> den det en	hendes hans <b>deres</b> dens dets en	OBL + selv sig selv
<b>plural</b>	<b>1st person</b>	vi	os	Vores	os selv
	<b>2nd person</b>	I	jer	Jeres	jer selv
	<b>3rd person</b>	de	dem	Deres	dem selv

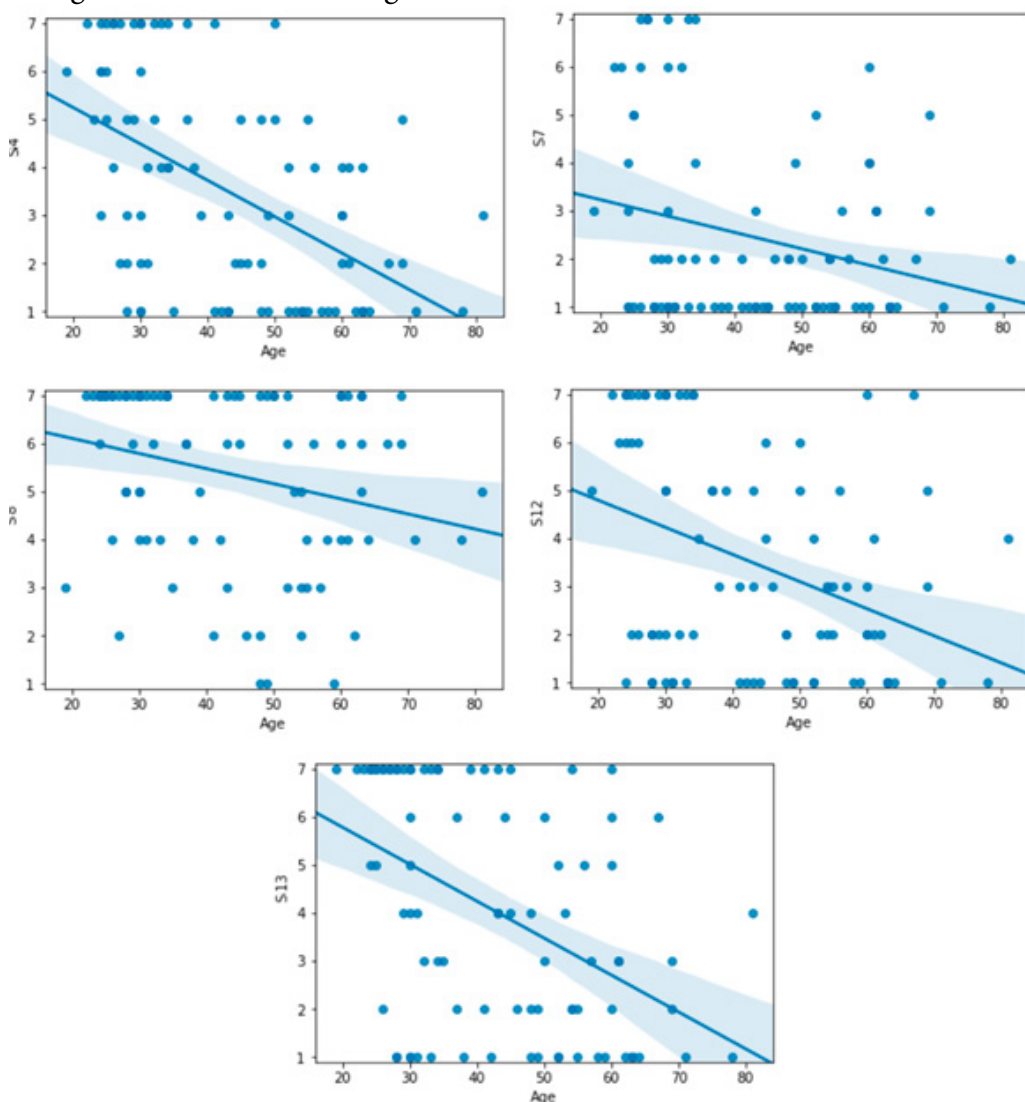
**Table 4:** Modified pronoun paradigm.

### 8. Discussion: Change and flexibility in the pronouns class

Thus far, this paper has presented and analysed examples of a previously undescribed use of the pronoun *de*. While singular *de* has not been studied from a linguistic perspective until now, this does not necessarily mean that the phenomenon is new. The earliest example in my data was recorded in 2014, but most likely it was in use prior to that. Estimating more closely when it started occurring requires work beyond the scope of this paper, but a relevant parallel to draw is to English singular *they*, which has been around for a very long time (as a generic pronoun since the 14<sup>th</sup> century according to Balhorn 2004) and which is almost identical to singular *de* in both its generic and specific uses. For instance, Conrod (2019) examines definite, specific use of singular *they*, which resembles the non-generic uses of singular *de* analysed in this paper. Given these parallels, it is tempting to hypothesize that singular *de* has arisen due to English influence. But it is also possible that singular *they* and singular *de* are a case of convergent evolution. Danish and English are similar both in terms of ancestry and current sociocultural environment, and it would not be impossible for some of the same processes and developments to take place in them both. The situation is similar to the one for generic *du* as described by Jensen (2009:91) - it may be a consequence of English influence, but without further research, it cannot be said for certain.

Whether or not singular *de* is a new phenomenon or not, it has characteristics associated with linguistic innovations. Most prominently, it seems to be more common and more accepted among younger speakers<sup>11</sup>. All instances of singular *de* in my video-audio data are produced by speakers

between 20 and 35 years of age (estimated). The one group from the elicitation data who did not produce any instances of singular *de*, Group 1, was also set apart from Groups 1 and 2 by being older in age, in their late 40s and early 50s. To examine further whether this is an indication that singular *de* is primarily used by young speakers, I conducted an acceptability rating survey (n=90) that asked participants to rate a series of recorded example sentences for how natural they sounded on a scale from 1 to 7 (cf. Boss 2019). While the survey should be seen only as an initial probe with further, more throughout research needed to draw a definite conclusion, the results do suggest a negative correlation between age and likelihood of giving the target sentences a high rating. This is illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Correlations (between -0.26 and -0.5) between age of participant and rating

of target sentences: Target sentences were *Det er en der synes at de selv er en god person* (4), *De er læge, så du kan godt stole på dem* (7), *Man kan aftale med en eller anden at de gør det for en* (8), *Jeg har ikke snakket med klienten siden jeg mødte dem* (12), *Hvis man får en ny ven er det vigtigt at lære dem at kende* (13)

Aside from younger speakers, minority groups have also historically been a driving force for linguistic change. Studies of English singular *they* discuss LGBTQIA+ communities as playing a role in the change and variation of its use. Conrod (2019:134) suggests that it might be due to the communities in question having a stronger need for gender neutral pronouns:

This [the need for pronouns other than *he* or *she*] is both to accommodate people who aren't easily referred to by *he/she*, but also to accommodate the needs of people to de-emphasize gender when, for example, discussing a same-gender partner in a potentially homophobic context.

(Conrod 2019:134)

I suspect that it may be a similar situation for singular *de*, and to test this intuition, my acceptability survey also asked participants whether they were in contact with an LGBTQIA+ community (e.g. by being LGBTQIA+ themselves or knowing a friend or family member who is). The results suggested that here, too, is a negative correlation; each of the target sentences yielded a correlation between -0.3 and -0.4. While it is indicated that younger speakers and speakers in contact with LGBTQIA+ communities are more likely to use singular *de*, these are initial results and other factors such as singular *de*'s position in the sentence (fronted, subordinated, etc.), the inferred context, and to what extent the referent is interpreted as generic may influence the acceptability ratings. It would be interesting to look further into this possible variation – sociolinguistic or information structure-wise – in future studies.

Returning to Conrod's (2019) argument that singular, gender-neutral use of *they* might be driven by a need to de-emphasize gender, this is also a plausible theory in relation to singular *de*. In recent years, issues of gender discrimination and the existence of transgender and nonbinary persons have increasingly become topics in the public debate. If speakers are generally more conscious of gender and how assumptions about gender might be made through language, e.g. gendered pronouns, they might also seek strategies to avoid making those assumptions. A contrast to this gender-avoidant use of singular *de* might be seen in parts of my elicitation data were the participants do explicitly orient to the gender of the character they are discussing. Groups

1 and 3 each go through a sequence where the same character is referred to with multiple different pronouns by the same speaker in quick succession; CAM in example (13), where Group 1 is discussing the coffee story, and ANN in (14), where Group 3 is discussing the playground story:

(13) Group 1 | 2:33

- 01 \*CAM: men ud fra den der er der bare en aktør så=  
but according to that there is just one actor so
- 02 \*ART: [tjæ]  
yes
- 03 → \*CAM: [=der kun hende og kaffekoppen [eller måske to→  
there is only her and the coffee cup or maybe two
- 04 \*ART: [eller han→  
or he
- 05 \*BIT: og kaffen→  
and the coffee
- 06 → \*CAM: hende han eller hen ja→  
her he or sie<sup>12</sup> yes

(14) Group 3 | 8:08

- 01 \*ANN: ne:j så man skal lissom asså sørge for at man bliver respekteret  
no: then you need to like make sure that you are respected
- 02 på en eller anden måde→  
somehow
- 03 \*ANN: ø:hm→  
uhm
- 04 \*CEA: jaer→  
yeah
- 05 \*ANN: når man er ny for ellers så hvis (.) man er f-  
when you are new because otherwise then if (.) you are f-
- 06 \*ANN: ikke at man skal være sindssygt hård men hvis man er alt for blød  
not that you should be crazy strict but if you are way too soft
- 07 til at stærte med→  
in the beginning
- 08 \*ANN: hh så det måske sån lidt→  
then it is maybe like a little
- 09 → \*ANN: okay men så kan vi slippe afsted med mere når det er hende der  
okay but then we can get away with more when it is her
- 10 har gårdvagt eller ham der (har gårdvagt) ((mumbled))  
who is on playground duty or him who (is on playground duty)
- 11 \*BEX: mm→
- 12 (.)
- 13 → \*ANN: hen→  
sie
- 14 \*CEA: jaer→  
yeah

In both examples, the speaker points to the main character of the story, using one pronoun, *hende* 'her' in both cases, which indexes that character as female. Immediately after, this categorization of the character as female is questioned by adding *eller han/ham* 'or he/him', which acknowledges the possibility that the character is male. In (14), it is the same speaker, ANN, who makes this addition, while in (13), another speaker, ART, is the one to challenge the categorization. In both examples, the original speaker (CAM and ANN) eventually adds the pronoun *hen* 'sie' as well, introducing the possibility that the character is neither male or female, or at least that the participants in the conversation cannot know either way.

A similar thing happens in (15) where Group 2 are discussing the dressing room story. This story is set apart from the other stimulus stories by the fact that the main character is explicitly said to be nonbinary. This means that 1) the participants have knowledge about the character's gender and 2) the story itself orients to gender as a relevant topic.

(15) Group 2 | 30:01

- 01 \*CAL: ja hva er der sket↗  
yes what has happened
- 02 \*BOB: ja↗  
yes
- 03 \*CAL: de::  
they::  
04 \*BOB: personen identificerer sig som non binær å så: øh:  
[føler=  
the person identifies as nonbinary and then: uh: they  
feel
- 05 \*ALF: [der er ikke  
it is not
- 06 mulighed for dem→  
possible for them
- 07 \*BOB: =de sig utilpas  
uncomfortable
- 08 \*DAN: ja ja↗  
yes yes
- 09 \*CAL: [(xxxxx)
- 10 \*BOB: [(xx ja) å så følger personen at der ikke er mulighed→  
yes and then the person feels that it is not possible  
11 (0.2)
- 12 \*DAN: jæh↗  
yes
- 13 → \*BOB: for sån: (0.2) at blive: (0.3) at de:r et sted hvo:r  
[hø- høn=  
to like: (0.2) to be: (0.3) that there is a place  
where x- xe<sup>13</sup>
- 14 \*CAL: [hvør  
where



- 15 \*BOB: [(kan s̄an)→  
           (can like)  
 16 \*DAN: [blive:: [akkomoderet eller [hv̄a (.) hv̄a det nu hedder↘  
           be:: accommodated or what (.) whatever it's called  
 17 \*BOB:               [ja↘                               [ja↘  
                           yes                                yes  
 18 \*BOB: lige præcis↘  
           exactly

In lines 06 and 07, both BOB and ALF initially refer to the main character using singular *de*. However, as the discussion progresses, BOB uses the neologistic pronoun *høn* in line 13 to refer to the same character. The pronoun is produced somewhat hesitantly, restarting it once and with several of the preceding words elongated. Similarly in examples (13) and (14), the *hen* is tagged on at the end after the original utterance is finished, and in ANN's case the end of her previous utterance is mumbled, all suggesting some uncertainty surrounding their pronoun usage. This uncertainty may be regarding how and whether to categorize the character being spoken about. In examples (13) and (14), the character's gender is indexed as soon as the first pronoun *hende* is spoken, but this indexation could have "passed" without the participants explicitly noticing it (Hopper and LeBaron 1998: 60). However, the indexation is made explicit when *eller han/ham* is added and highlights that an alternative interpretation is possible, thus making the question of gender a relevant topic, which the speakers can further orient to by adding the gender neutral pronoun *hen*. In (15), gender is already implicitly a relevant topic in the story, and BOB orients to this by using *høn*. In contrast to the analyses in section 6, singular *de* is not used in these excerpts, suggesting that perhaps singular *de* is more likely to be employed to avoid indexing gender, while *hen* and *høn*, both constructed pronouns explicitly designed to be used gender neutrally, can function as tools for the speakers to explicitly index gender (neutrality).

*Hen* (but not *høn*, to my knowledge) is also used as a chosen pronoun, such as in (16), where it refers to a specific referent (like the specific gender-specified use of singular *de*). The excerpt is from data that was originally recorded for a course on Child Language Acquisition and features a 4-year-old (CHI) and two adults in everyday interaction. In the excerpt, CHI is looking at the second adult present through the camera:

(16) køkkenhygge | 5:40

- CHI:           kan jeg se dig↗  
                   can I see you  
 STF:           kan du- det da dig der ved om du kan se hen↘  
                   can you- you're the one who knows if you can see hir

Evidently, singular *de* is not alone in being a pronoun that is used in interaction in ways that differ from traditional descriptions. In terms of gender reference, the pronoun *den* ‘it (common gender)’ is also used with specific gender-specified reference (Miltersen 2018). Another example is Bruun’s (2019) description of non-generic, 1<sup>st</sup> person usage of the otherwise generic 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun *man*.

A final perspective to consider in regard to singular *de* as, if not an entirely new usage, then one that is gaining ground, is the fact that its occurrence is not limited to interactional contexts like the ones analysed above. While it is rare in more formal registers (such as news articles and similar), it does occur in asynchronous, written texts, such as example (17). The example is from a flowchart made by *Den Grønne Studenterbevægelse* (‘The Green Student’s Movement’) and posted to the organisation’s Facebook page. The flowchart promotes the movement’s protest event ‘Green Friday’, an anti-capitalist and climate-activist alternative to Black Friday. It starts with a balloon with the question *Skal du købe julegaver?* ‘Do you need to buy Christmas presents?’. If the reader follows the yes-arrow, the flowchart proceeds with balloons with questions about the recipient of the present to be bought, i.e. a hypothetical person. The last two balloons are the parts relevant to the present analysis, and the text in them is reproduced as (17):

- (17) a. er det én, der mener, **de** har brug for materielle ting for  
is it one REL believe.PRS 3SG have.PRS need PP material.PL thing.PL PP  
at blive lykkelige?  
INF become happy.PL  
‘is it someone who believes they need material things to be  
happy?’
- b. tag **dem** under armen og med til green friday - vi  
take.IMP 3SG PP arm.DEF and with PP green friday we PRS  
lover det gør jer mere lykkelige!  
promise. it make.PRS 2PL more happy.PL  
‘take them by the hand and bring them along to Green Friday  
- we promise it will make you happier!’

The example shows that singular *de* is sufficiently established in Danish to be used in general audience semi-formal written language, at least by some speakers.

In summary, contrary to traditional perceptions of pronouns as a closed class, Danish pronouns have undergone and are currently undergoing various

innovations, pertaining both to singular *de* and to other pronouns, all of which would be interesting topics for future studies.

### **9. Conclusion**

This paper has presented and analysed examples of singular *de* used in talk-in-interaction, which is a use of the pronoun *de* that has not previously been described from a grammatical and linguistic perspective. It is found that singular *de* is identical to plural *de* in form, apart from the fact that singular *de* can take singular agreement on adjectives and predicate nouns. The two differ from each other most significantly in their referential scope. The analysis of the use of singular *de* in interaction finds that speakers may use singular *de* about both generic and specific referents, and about specific referents that are either specified or unspecified for gender. Speakers can use singular *de* as a reference strategy to avoid indexing gender and thereby orienting to gender as a relevant topic. However, they may also use singular *de* to explicitly index the gender of the referent as nonbinary. There appears to be some variation in the use of singular *de* across speakers depending on age and possibly other sociolinguistic factors, similarly to what is the case for English singular *they*, which from a use perspective singular *de* resembles highly. It is also relevant to compare singular *de* to other innovations in Danish pronouns, such as the Swedish loan *hen*, which may index gender (neutrality) more explicitly in interaction. In conclusion, phenomena such as singular *de* and other innovative pronouns cast doubt on traditional definitions of the pronouns class as a closed class. The characterisation of pronouns as semantically poor might also be questioned; speakers in interaction may use pronouns to communicate and negotiate various things about identity, social stance, and membership categorization, singular *de* being just one example.

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## **APPENDIX A: Case stories**

### **The coffee story:**

Da: Klokken er 8:12 mandag morgen, og en studerende har lige netop nået at købe en kop kaffe i kantinen før undervisningen starter, men kommer til at spilde hele koppen ud over sig selv på vej op ad trappen.

En: It's 8:12 AM Monday morning, and a student has just bought a cup of coffee in time before class starts, but accidentally spills the entire cup [on themselves] on the way up the stairs.

### **The supermarket story**

Da: En kunde i supermarkedet skynder sig hen til kasserne. Ved den ene er der kun én person i kø, og bag kassen sidder en nyansat medarbejder, der lige nu har problemer med at bipse en vare ind. Køen til den anden kasse er meget lang, men der sidder en erfaren medarbejder ved den. Kunden overvejer hvilken kasse der er bedst at stille sig i kø til.

En: A customer at the supermarket rushes to the checkout stations. At one station, only one person is in line, and behind the counter is a recently hired cashier, who is currently experiencing trouble registering an item. The line behind the other counter is very long, but it is served by an experienced cashier. The customer considers which station might be best to get in line to.

### **The playground story**

Da: En nyansat folkeskolelærer er på sin første gårdvagt og ser pludselig to børn der er ved at komme op at slås. Det ene barn smider en plastikskovl efter det andet barn.

En: A recently hired primary school teacher is on the first playground duty and suddenly sees two children who are about to get into a fight. One child throws a plastic shovel after the other child.

### **The dressing room story**

Da: En elev i 6.A har for vane at pjække fra idrætstimerne. Eleven er nonbinær og har ikke lyst til at klæde om i de kønsopdelte omklædningsrum.

En: A pupil in class 6A tends to skip P.E. classes. The pupil is nonbinary and doesn't want to change in either of the gender segregated dressing rooms.

### **The baptism story**

Da: De nybagte forældres bedste ven er på jagt efter et lykønskingskort til at tage med til dåben, men ender med frustreret at opgive, da alle kortene er enten lyseblå eller lyserøde.

En: The new parents' best friend is hunting for a wishing card to bring to the baptism, but eventually gives up, as all the cards are either light blue or pink.

### Abbreviations

1 = 1<sup>st</sup> person, 2 = 2<sup>nd</sup> person, 3 = 3<sup>rd</sup> person, ADV = adverb, CONJ = conjunction, DEF = definite, IMP = imperative, INF = infinitive particle, PL = plural, POSS = possessive, PP = preposition, PRS = present tense, PRT = particle, PST = past tense, PST.PRT = past participle, REFL = reflexive, REL = relative pronoun, SG = singular

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> More so for 1<sup>st</sup> person than 2<sup>nd</sup> person, where other devices may be necessary to pick out the proper referent among several potential addressees, e.g. by gaze or vocatives).
- <sup>2</sup> Animals and “metaphorically alive” objects such as dolls may be referred to with either *den/det* or gendered pronouns.
- <sup>3</sup> Research does however suggest that he is not perceived as truly generic by speakers (e.g. Mühläusler and Harré 1990:CH9).
- <sup>4</sup> Danish exhibits T/V-distinction, although it is nowadays rarely used.
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/pdf/Glossing-Rules.pdf>
- <sup>6</sup> Relatedly, Conrod (2019:171) hypothesizes that English singular *they* (which is parallel to singular *de* in several ways) can be used to signal a social or relational distance between the conversational participants and the referent (“distal *they*”).
- <sup>7</sup> While the utterance in 05 is syntactically and intonationally potentially complete, it is pragmatically incomplete (it is unclear why ADA is bringing up that she looked at the event page), which lets BEA not take the turn despite the long pause.
- <sup>8</sup> Of course, it is not a one-to-one relation, and like in (10) it is perfectly possible that the referent’s chosen pronoun is *de*. To explore this possibility, I was able to consult with CAL about three weeks after the recording, and he confirmed that the referent is male and the more specific pronoun would be *han*. CAL also informed me that he makes a conscious effort to use gender neutral language when the gender of the referent is unknown, but that he was surprised to hear that he had used *de* in this instance, since he did know the person’s gender. This illustrates quite well that pronoun strategy can both be a conscious choice and subconscious behaviour, even in the same speaker.
- <sup>9</sup> It may also be that the referent is not nonbinary but wish to be spoken about in gender neutral language. In that case, the pronoun does not indicate the (specific) referent’s gender, but its gender feature is unspecified. As I have no examples of it in my data, I will not discuss it further here.
- <sup>10</sup> In this particular story, the character in the story is described as the *ven* ‘friend’ of the parents. The word *ven* can both be interpreted as gender neutral or as male specific (as opposed to *veninde* ‘female friend’), which could arguably have prompted ALI to categorize the character as male. (The choice of the word *ven* is a fault on behalf of the author, as I do not have the gender-specific meaning in my idiolect). However, participants in the group do refer to characters in other stories that are only described with exclusively gender neutral terms (such as ‘student’ and ‘customer’) with *han*, so the kind of negotiation happening in (12) is not solely due the ambiguity of the word *ven* and can be seen as an example of a more general practice.
- <sup>11</sup> Incidentally, this is also the case for singular *they* (Conrod 2019; Konnelly and Cowper 2019).
- <sup>12</sup> I have translated *hen* to the English neologistic pronoun *sie/hir*, as both are constructed pronouns explicitly designed to be gender neutral.
- <sup>13</sup> *høn* is translated into *xe*, another English constructed gender neutral pronoun