

Zaal Kikvidze
Kutaisi, Georgia

E/N Pronouns: Self-reference and Social Deixis in Translation

Abstract. *The present paper is a discussion of one of the most prominent illustrations of pronominal social deixis; this is the Royal we (aka royal plural, Plural of Majesty, Majestic Plural, Pluralis Majestatis), used for self-reference by monarchs or some individuals of very high rank. Initially, it touches upon the emergence of this usage; afterwards, the paper deals with adequate designations for related items, re-introducing the symbols E/N for the singular/Plural of Majesty opposition. Finally, there is an analysis of translation-related problems of the phenomenon in point based on the text of Amiran-Darejaniani, a medieval Georgian epic, and its English translation.*

Keywords: *Plural of Majesty, social deixis, Georgian, English, Amiran-Darejaniani*

Pronouns constitute a rather peculiar class of words and this is to a large extent due to their deictic meanings. Normally, deictics are shifters, and it is their non-referential properties that provide for the occurrence of various kinds of challenges associated with their translation, specifically, whenever there are cross-linguistic differences between their planes of content and planes of expression. Hence, their relative meanings depend on contexts. “Neither the physical nor the social setting is something that is fixed, immutable and simply “out there.” Instead these phenomena, and the very real constraints they provide, are dynamically and socially constituted by activities (talk included) of the participants which stand in a reflexive relationship to the context thus constituted” [1, p. 7]. This is particularly true of 1st person plural pronouns which ordinarily are not pluralized versions of respective 1st person singular pronouns either in terms of their form or meaning; moreover, they are associative plurals distinguishing between inclusive and exclusive varieties (the named referent plus or minus some other/s). Of course, complications become more challenging when languages demonstrate formal differences in terms of clusivity. Challenges associated with translation become more complex when it comes up with social deixis which “concerns the encoding of social distinctions that are relative to participant-roles, particularly aspects of the social relationship holding between speaker and addressee(s) or speaker and some referent. In many languages, distinctions of fine gradation between the relative ranks of speaker and addressee are systematically encoded throughout, for example, the morphological system, in which case we talk of **honorifics**; but such distinctions are also regularly encoded in choices between pronouns, summons forms or vocatives, and titles of address in various languages” [2, p. 63].

In the present paper I will discuss one of the most prominent illustrations of pronominal social deixis; this is the Royal *we* (aka *royal plural*, *Plural of Majesty*, *Majestic Plural*, *Pluralis Majestatis*), used for self-reference by monarchs or some individuals of very high rank, “meaning ‘I’ alone, as in the oft-cited ‘We are not amused’, allegedly uttered by Queen Victoria” [3, p. 64].

Initially, I will touch upon the likely emergence of this usage; afterwards, I will deal with adequate designations for related items; and, finally, I will discuss translation-related problems of the phenomenon in point.

The American grammarian George Oliver Curme seems to be (one of) the first who discussed its origin; here is what he wrote back in 1935: “the associative *we* was first used in the third century in imperial decrees, in that period of Roman history when two or three rulers reigned together and hence were associated in the official proclamations. Later, whenever the political power was centered in one emperor the old *we* was retained, so that although the associative force was present, since the ruler included his advisers, the associative *we* developed into royal *we*, the Plural of Majesty, since the ruler spoke of himself in his official announcements in the plural instead of the singular, as ‘We decree’ instead of ‘I decree.’ This usage spread to the different European courts and was common in the Old English period” [4, p. 150]. Later, R. Brown and A. Gilman associated it with the use of the plural to the emperor which began in the 4th century; they provided a more detailed scenario of its emergence: “By that time there were actually two emperors; the ruler of the eastern empire had his seat in Constantinople and the ruler of the west sat in Rome. Because of Diocletian’s reforms the imperial office, although vested in two men, was administratively unified. Words addressed to one man were, by implication, were addressed to both. The choice of *vos* as a form of address may have been in response to this implicit plurality. An emperor is also plural in another sense; he is the summation of his people and can speak as their representative. Royal persons sometimes say “we” when an ordinary man would say “I.” The Roman emperor sometimes spoke of himself as *nos*, and the reverential *vos* is the simple reciprocal to this” [5, p. 255]. The phenomenon in point has sometimes been referred to as *nosism*, derived from the Latin *nos* ‘we.’ However, it does not seem to be a successful label for two reasons: a) it refers only to the Majestic Plural and not to its counterpart within the framework of social deixis; 8) *nosism* paradigmatically suggests that its counterpart should be **egoism* which is too far from being acceptable for linguistic purposes owing to its specific connotations. Hence, back in 2012 [6] I suggested use of the symbols **E** and **N** (from the Latin *ego* and *nos*), hence, E/N pronouns in order to label deictic options between the singular and the Majestic Plural (including personal pronouns with all their pertaining oblique forms and respective possessive and reflexive pronouns). This is in parallel to R. Brown and A. Gilman’s designations T/V (from the Latin *tu* and *vos*) to label pronominal distinctions between formality and informality [7].

Both in English and Georgian display E/N oppositions. English does not abound in respective pronominal forms; the E pronouns: *I, me, my, mine, myself*; the N pronouns: *we, us, our, ours, ourself*. As for Georgian, it is a morphologically rich language; however, its personal pronouns are hardly inflected for cases in the same way as it happens with other substantives. The primary Georgian E pronoun is *me*, and it occurs unaltered in the dative and ergative cases. As for genitive, there is a suppletive form: *čem-i*. The root *čem-* is a respective possessive pronoun which is regularly declined for all the seven cases (including vocative), taking on not only case markers but also postpositions, particles, and extension markers. There is a similar pattern for the Georgian N pronoun: in nominative, dative, and ergative, it is *čven*; in genitive, it becomes *čven-i*. The latter is a base of the respective possessive pronoun regularly declined for all the seven cases (including vocative), taking on not only case markers but also postpositions, particles, and extension markers. Therefore, they abound in word-forms.

Truly enough, the Plural of Majesty is a noteworthy linguistic phenomenon and the related alternation of respective E/N pronouns also deserves due attention; however, it is also true that Royal *we* has become rather infrequent in our days, so infrequent that it is sometimes regarded as “virtually obsolete” [8, p. 351]. Hence, initially it may hardly seem to be of interest for translation studies. However, with respect to the fact that the usage in question normally abounds in historical texts (both fiction and documentary), one should in no way exclude from the research agenda problems pertaining to its use and related trans-linguistic and trans-cultural implications.

In order to illustrate the aforementioned I decided to refer to the text of *Amiran-Darejaniani*, a medieval Georgian epic, and its English translation. Here is what D. M. Lang and G. M. Meredith-Owens tell about the work: “Georgian romance of the ‘Golden Age’ of Georgian literature is *Amiran-Darejaniani*, or ‘The story of Amiran, son of Darejan’, a prose work in twelve episodes or chapters attributed to Moses of Khoni (Mose Khoneli), who is supposed to have flourished in the twelfth century. [...] It is a *Ritterroman* pure and simple – an account of endless battles and jousting, with a strong fairy-tale element involving dragons, evil spirits, *devis*, magic men of copper, miraculous elixirs, and other supernatural phenomena. This cycle of tales [is] valuable as much for the insight it provides into the manners and beliefs of the medieval Orient as for its purely literary merits” [9, p. 454]. It was in 1896 when it first appeared in print; presently, there are a number of its editions. 1958 saw the first publication of its translation: it was translated into English by Robert Horne Stevenson [10].

The rather noteworthy case of the E/N alternation, I am going to deal with in this paper, occurs in the initial part of the romance. I will cite a quote from D. M. Lang and G. M. Meredith-Owens’ paper in order to render the context: “While out hunting, King Abesalom of India sets off in vain pursuit of a marvelous antelope ‘with golden horns, black eyes and hooves, a white belly, and a red back’. He lights upon a building within which are portraits of the champion and knight-errant Amiran-Darejanisdze, his two comrades, and their three retainers, together with the picture of the daughter of the King of the Seas.

Nearby on the plain lie bones of men and horses, and piles of shattered armour. King Abesalom is anxious to learn more about these mysterious heroes. On the advice of one of his vazirs, he sends envoys into Persia to inquire whether any of Amiran's old comrades are still alive. In a city 'on the bank of a river that came flowing down from the land of Balkh', they came upon the venerable Savarsamisdze, erstwhile companion of Amiran in his exploits" [9, p. 457].

It is after finding Savarsamisdze that King Abesalom sends him a letter of invitation. Here are its Georgian and English versions:

GE-01: *savarsamiszesza, gamorčeulsa č'abuk'sa gibrzanebs mepoba čveni: mxiarul var sicocxlisa šenisatvis, vmadlobt ymertsa, romel žeret cocxal xar. ac', ra c'aik'itxo ese c'igni, sc'apit c'amodi c'inaše čvensa, romel čven gavixarnet naxvita šenita da vita mama, isre p'at'ivit dagič'ivot da gangisvenot, vita gamzrdelsa da gvitxrobdi ambavta p'at'ronisa šenisa amiran darežanisata da ganmikarve šeč'irveba.*

EN-01: *To Savarsamidze, the renowned dchabuki: Our Majesty sends you this summons. - We rejoice that you are still alive, and thank God for granting you length of days. Now as soon as you have read this letter from us, make haste to appear before us, that the sight of you may rejoice us. We will treat you as if you had been tutor to us in our boyhood – while you shall tell us the story of you lord Amiran Darejanisdze, and to dispel melancholy which oppresses our heart! - Long life to you!*

It is noteworthy that both the original text of the passage and its English translation exemplify the N pronouns (and pertaining verb forms) whenever the king refers to himself, as it should have been expected in both languages and cultures of the period of time in question.

Savarsamisdze was rather aged and disabled; therefore, he failed to appear before the inviter. Hence, King Abesalom sent him another letter:

GE-02: *vinatgan ymertsa am žamamdis mouc'evixar, ese ara egebis, tuca ara gnaxa mepobaman čemman. ac' c'armomivlenian orni didebulni čemni – žaunar da omar, da šeuk'azmavs k'ubo, romel šexvide šigan da uč'irvelad mogiq'vanon aka, da me vpicav ymertsa cxovelsa, romel moslvisagan k;ide ara ars c'amali.*

EN-02: *Since God has spared you thus long, Our Majesty must not fail to see you. Now I have dispatched Jaunar and Omar, two of my barons, to you, with a furnished litter: climb into this and they will bring you to us without hardship. For by the living God, I swear that you must come!*

Here we should pay attention to several items in the latter passage: 1. the 'I' in the second sentence (*Now I have dispatched*). The parallel sentence in the original Georgian displays no pronoun since it is redundant (Georgian is a pro-drop language); there is *c'armomivlenian* which is adequately translated as *I have dispatched*; 2. GE-02: *orni didebulni čemni*, EN-02: *two of my barons*; 3. GE-02: *me vpicav*, EN-02: *I swear*.

Thus, the Georgian original displays the E pattern, as it can hardly be expected in both languages and cultures of the period of time in question, and its English translation simply follows it.

Hence, it is of particular importance that the English translator interferes with a footnote stating the following: “Here and elsewhere the translation reflects the oscillation in the text between the singular and the *pluralis maiestatis*” [10, p. 8, ft. 2]. The translator is sensitive about the E/N usage clarifying why singular forms are prevalent in the text of the English translation when the king refers to himself instead of the expected N forms, that is, the Plural of Majesty.

Since T/V and E/N pronouns are normally viewed as social deictic items, their use ought to be analyzed through the lens of the Ethnography of Communication (EOC); more specifically, I will apply one of its versions: Ethnography of SPEAKING [11; 12] as a framework for the analysis of speech events with E/N oscillations within their social and cultural contexts, taking into consideration D. Cameron’s [13, p. 57] caution that the model should be used more as a guide than a sort of recipe.

Having offered the acronym SPEAKING as a mnemonic device to identify possible relevant factors, Hymes identified a number of coefficients such as Scene (the physical and temporal setting and its cultural definition), Participants (speaker and audience), Ends (purposes, goals, and outcomes), Acts (form, content and sequential arrangements), Keys (tone underlying the event), Instrumentalities (choice of channel such as oral, written, etc.), Norms (social rules governing the event and the participants’ actions and reactions), Genre (kind of speech act or event). I will take the model not as “a sort of recipe” but rather as a guide in order to detect what is specific about the use of E/N forms. Hence, for the sake of this I will need to observe other speech events in which King Abesalom is a speaker. Here are a couple illustrations of how the king refers to himself when he talks in the presence of Savarsamisdze and his barons:

GE-03: *gamxiarulda guli čemi xilvita šenita da amistvis šenca mxiarul iq’av, romel vitamc mšobeli xar čemi, egre dagič’iro da, tu gindes saxlsa šensa c’aslva, didita p’at’ivita da didebita gaggzavno.*

EN-03: *My heart is gladdened by the sight of you; and you too may be glad, for I will treat you as my father, and when you desire to go home, I will send you off with great honour.*

GE-04: *didad visc’rapi ambavta p’at’ronisa šenisata da tkven, mista q’matata. tumca mašvrili iq’av, ac’ ic’q’e da mitxrobdī.*

EN-04: *I have been consumed with longing to hear of the deeds of your lord and also of his retainers – but at first you were fatigued. Now begin, however, and tell me of them.*

As it can be clearly seen from the above-cited illustrations, the king refers to himself exclusively in E forms (pronouns and/or respectively inflected verbs). Given the sameness of the Participants (and a majority of other coefficients), it is not difficult to observe that the occurrence of N forms (Plural of Majesty) are confined to Instrumentalities, specifically, to a choice of a channel of communication, in this case, between oral and written channels; more precisely, the king uses the Plural of Majesty (N forms) in the written correspondence with Savarsamisdze; however, in their face-to-face interaction, the king switches to the singular.

It is also noteworthy that, in this case, the translator no longer expresses his concern on inadequacies associated with E/N oscillations.

Therefore, since the use of the Plural of Majesty is commonly confined to the written format of speech, it can be viewed as a channel marker. This is not to say that this kind of congruence is a universal phenomenon. For instance, take Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in which one can readily observe following: "Claudius uses the royal plural almost in each and every utterance of his. He even does so in the presence of the queen, which clearly underlines his superiority" [14, p. 141].¹

The data supporting the treatment of the use of the Plural of Majesty (N forms) in *Amiran-Darejaniani* (both in the original Georgian text and its English translation) as a channel marker is just one of the illustrations of its specific properties. Moreover, investigations of the use, code-switching and translation of E/N pronouns (and aligned grammatical constructions), as a case in point in the present paper, seem to be rather productive with respect to both their peculiar features in various languages and the study of social deixis in translation at large. Hence, based on what I have discussed in the present paper, in the future I will study E/N oscillations in other, available translations of the aforementioned romance² which will surely provide an adequate platform for the further inclusion of much more parallel texts in order to shed light on various aspects of the phenomenon in question.

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¹ The convention has been followed in translations of the poem into various languages, including Georgian.

² Alongside English, the romance has been translated into a number of languages, specifically, into Russian [15], into Ukrainian [16], into German [17].

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