

# PRAYER, PRONOUNS, AND REFERENCE TO GOD

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One of the fundamental things that speakers use language for is to refer: to point to objects or individuals in the world. Perhaps the most common linguistic devices used to accomplish this task are *deictic* pronouns, like ‘you’ or ‘I.’ Deictic uses of pronouns are ones in which the pronoun directly refers to someone or something in the context of utterance. In the case of ‘you,’ as in “You look well today,” the deictic pronoun ‘you’ picks out an addressee, the person to whom the comment is directed. (Notice that the sentence contains another deictic element, ‘today,’ which points to the day during which the sentence is uttered.) If there is not someone present in the context who can serve as an addressee, the utterance is intuitively deficient in some way: we can’t decide whether the person being addressed looks well or not if there is no one there for ‘you’ to point to. In traditional philosophical and linguistic analyses, such utterances are said to lack a truth value – they are neither true nor false. If there is no ‘you’ present, we can’t know whether ‘you’ is among the individuals who look well (and therefore, whether the sentence is true or not).

In his paper, Daniel Weiss carefully examines a thorny question raised by the use of the deictic 'you' in a prayer context. When there is nothing in the world for 'you' to point to, what does it refer to (or more properly, what does the speaker intend for it to refer to)? The answer that Weiss provides to this question, drawing on standard linguistic analyses of deixis, is novel and insightful. In some cases, it throws new light on old problems in the philosophy of language. However, at some points, Weiss's analysis departs from the linguistic understanding of deictic pronouns like 'you' in striking ways. Whether this departure is theologically desirable is beyond my capacity for comment. However, in this response, I will try to point out where Weiss's analysis draws on traditional linguistic analysis of deixis, where he departs from it, and what other properties of the deictic pronoun 'you' might be relevant to the argument Weiss makes.

Weiss begins his paper by posing the question squarely: how are we to understand the uses of the deictic pronoun 'you' in prayer? In linguistic terms, 'you' simply picks out a unique addressee, whose identity is known to the speaker (and listener). In common conversation, using 'you' presupposes that there is a person present who is the object of the address. However, in prayer, the addressee is not (physically) present. Furthermore, in standard linguistic analyses of deictic pronouns like 'you,' the intended referent of 'you' varies with the conversational context. 'You' may pick out a different person each time it is used, depending on who is being addressed. In contrast, in prayer, the 'you' (presumably) always picks out the same addressee. It is *not* contextually variable (and if it is, serious theological problems would presumably ensue, at least for monotheistic traditions like Judaism).

The prayer uses of 'you' therefore seem quite different from conversational uses of 'you' – neither of the basic properties of deictic 'you' described above (contextual variability, grounding to a contextually co-present addressee) seem to hold for its prayer uses. Weiss doesn't frame it in quite the following terms, but he might: assuming that these properties don't hold of the prayer 'you,' why does prayer use 'you' at all? Why not a novel pronominal form, referring only to God? Or why not

avoid the deictic 'you' (the second person, as Weiss stresses) altogether, using only a name ('God') or a definite description ('the Almighty') to invoke the deity?

It is striking that Hebrew does not choose either of these options. Perhaps even more striking are the cross-linguistic facts. Looking at 15 languages and dialects – Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, German, Dutch, Gronings, Zeeuws, Serb-Croatian, Korean, Farsi, Urdu, Miskitu, and Japanese – it appears that no language uses a novel God-only referring form or restricts itself to a name or definite description in prayer. It is worth noting that things could easily have been otherwise – both of the alternatives above would seem to be perfectly legitimate ways of referring to God in prayer. What does the use of 'you' in prayer, in so many different languages, cultures, and traditions, tell us?

Weiss suggests an answer to this question which implicitly rejects the claim above: he argues that the 'you' found in prayer *is* a real deictic pronoun. In fact, its deictic nature is central to its function in prayer contexts. First, with respect to the requirement of an addressee who is present, Weiss argues that the prayer 'you' does pick out an individual to whom the prayer is addressed. However, this individual is so inherently salient (so "present," in any context) that (as Weiss puts it) further contextual specification is unnecessary. God is present, automatically, in any context, for anyone uttering a prayer.

Second, with respect to contextual variability, Weiss makes a similar argument. Since God is present in any context, always available as an addressee for prayer, the contextual variability of 'you' is irrelevant in a prayer context. In an important sense, context does *not* vary where God is concerned. God is the only addressee so present, in any context, that the mere 'you' will suffice. From a linguistic standpoint, this is an appealing result: 'you' retains its essential properties in a prayer context. What changes is the nature of the addressee.

Since these two contextual factors (co-presence and variability) are irrelevant where God is concerned, what properties of the deictic 'you' remain? Here is where Weiss's argument becomes really interesting: what remains is the deictic function of 'you' to pick out an addressee, a second

person. As Weiss puts it, the use of 'you' implicitly puts the person uttering the prayer in a relationship with God. Rather than identifying an object or individual which is not directly related to the speaker, as a name or a definite description or perhaps even a God-specific pronominal form would, 'you' forces the person uttering the prayer to explicitly encode her relationship to God. In fact, Weiss argues, this latter fact may serve as a useful discipline for people engaged in prayer. The act of explicitly encoding it through 'you' may remind them of this relationship. This is what the use of 'you' in prayer ultimately tells us: that the person uttering the prayer is in a relationship with God.

Weiss goes on to make an even stronger claim: he argues that the use of 'you' is in fact the *only* legitimate way to refer to God. Since the mere 'you' will suffice to pick out God in any context, any further specification is not only irrelevant but possibly blasphemous. This means that using other forms (saying "God is all powerful" instead of "You are all powerful" in prayer) shifts emphasis away from the relationship and instead focuses on a reification of the description. This choice means that the person praying is imposing her conceptions of God, and letting some of her own bias, perspective, or ego intrude into how she thinks of (and talks to) God in prayer.

Weiss steps away from traditional linguistic analyses to make a larger theological point. While this move is interesting and may yield significant theological payoffs, it moves the prayer 'you' away from its traditional function as a deictic pronoun. Deictic pronouns (like all other pronouns) are devices which serve first and foremost to refer to individuals. Secondly, they also serve to explicitly encode some information regarding the relationship of the speaker to the person or object being picked out. However, once their primary work in picking out an individual is done, there is nothing semantically wrong with using another form to pick out the same person. For example, if you say "You look well today" when addressing me and believe it to be true, "Mike looks well today" will be equally true. Similarly, if a speaker believes "You are all-powerful" to be true when addressing God in prayer, saying "God is all-powerful" will be equally true. Weiss has some discussion of what it would mean to

predicate a property (like omnipotence) of an individual like God, which seems intended to speak to these issues, but their full impact eluded me.

One possible way of reconciling Weiss's arguments with the traditional linguistic analysis of 'you' is to claim that the difference between conventional and prayer uses of 'you' is in their primary and secondary functions. In ordinary conversation, the primary function of a deictic pronoun is semantic: it points to an individual, of which a sentence then predicates some property. The pragmatic function of encoding the relationship between the speaker and the individual or object being referred to is secondary. If Weiss is right, perhaps in prayer the pragmatic function of 'you' is primary, and its semantic function is secondary. Perhaps the relational function of 'you' is more important than its identificational one in prayer contexts. In conversation and prayer, then, 'you' might well do the same jobs, but the relative importance of those jobs may well differ. Weiss has some discussion of the pragmatics and semantics of mere 'you' which may point in this direction.

There is one other aspect of the pragmatics of deictic 'you' which Weiss does not fully address. Weiss rightly points out that using 'you' explicitly encodes the relationship between the speaker and God, a fact which may have practical utility for people in prayer and may also have larger theological implications regarding the nature of God. As noted above, these larger implications of the mere 'you' are largely beyond my capacity for comment. However, there is a very basic fact about 'you' that Weiss does not comment on: using 'you' implicitly assumes that God *can be addressed*. Again, it is worth noting that things could have been otherwise: God (as an all-powerful, all-knowing being) might well have been depicted in prayer as not available for direct address. The choice of 'you' in rabbinical prayer makes this availability explicit.

Since use of 'you' in prayer indicates that such a relationship *is* possible, it opens up the possibility that the nature of this relationship might vary across cultures and religious communities. Interestingly, this appears to be the case. Languages often distinguish between formal (distal) and informal (proximal) second person, such as Spanish (*Usted* versus *tu*) or German (*Sie* versus *du*). In such languages, there is a choice

between using formal and informal 'you' when addressing God in prayer. Languages appear to vary in which of these forms they choose. For instance, German and Spanish choose the informal *du* and *tu*, respectively. French, Farsi, Sebo-Croatian, and Urdu are similar. However, Dutch and Brazilian Portuguese choose the formal *U* and *o Senhor*, respectively. Korean and Japanese do the same. What these choices say about prayer in these cultures and how Weiss's mere 'you' analysis would extend to them is an open and interesting question.

Weiss's paper takes a careful look at what would appear to be a perplexing use of 'you,' and finds underlying sense in it, as well as some larger theological ramifications. His use of analytical tools from linguistics is impressive; I would be very interested to hear how he might extend his analysis to the wider range of reference to God in prayer and scripture cross-linguistically.