

Impersonal *You* and the Construction and Organization of Mental Spaces in Discourse*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Uses of Impersonal You

Pronoun *you* in English can be used in various ways. (1) and (2) are examples of the various uses of *you*. Henceforth, pronoun *you* under discussion is italicized. *You* in (1) refers to the addressee. *You* in this use is called “personal *you*.” *You* in (2a) refers to people in general. *You* in (2b) refers to the speaker, and *you* in this use is called “self-referring *you*.” *You* used in referring to people in general or the speaker as in (2a) and (2b) is called “impersonal *you*.”

(1) Do *you* like cats?

(2) a. *You* can never tell what will happen.

(Quirk et al. 1985: 354)

b. It wasn't a bad life. *You* got up at seven, had breakfast, went for a walk...

(Quirk et al. 1985: 354)

Self-referring *you* does not occur freely. It is found in conversational narratives where the speaker talks about her experiences (Ushie 1994).¹ It is rarely found in narratives recounted on formal occasions. There is also individual variation.² It is considered that speakers use impersonal *you* in recounting their experiences in order to generalize their experiences and/or to seek empathy (e.g., Bolinger 1979, Wales 1996).

It is possible for impersonal *you* and the first person singular *I* to be used together within

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¹ See Ushie (1994, 1995) as to when impersonal *you* cannot be used referring to the speaker.

² In terms of its distributional characteristics, self-referring *you* is similar to conversational historical present tense (cf. Wolfson 1982).

the same sentence or discourse and to refer to the same individual as in (3) and (4) below.³ In this case, impersonal *you* and the first person singular *I* can be assigned referents that differ in the degree of specificity, which causes ambiguity. In this paper, I will call this phenomenon “double interpretation.” In the sentence or discourse which allows double interpretation, the interpretation that involves impersonal *you* referring to a specific individual will be called “specific reading,” and the interpretation that involve impersonal *you* referring to a non-specific individual will be called “non-specific reading.” The aim of the paper is to characterize the double interpretation and discuss the mechanism that makes the double interpretation possible within the framework of mental space theory.⁴

1.2. Examples of Double Interpretation

In (3) and examples below, the sentences in square brackets provide relevant context but are not under consideration. The sentence in parentheses marked (b) is a sentence constructed from the attested example for the purpose of examining the interchangeability between the self-referring *you* and the first person singular *I* and one that has been judged to be acceptable by native speakers of English. Impersonal *you* and the first person singular pronouns that are interpreted as referring to the same individual are italicized.

Consider the example in (3) which allows double interpretation at the level of sentence. (3a) is an example of double interpretation. In (3a), the first person singular *I* is used in the *when* clause and impersonal *you* is used in the main clause. On the specific reading, it is understood that when the speaker talks about her childhood plight in class (at Berkeley), all of a sudden, those who have heard it look at her differently. On the non-specific reading, the experience of suddenly being looked at differently by people to whom one tells their childhood plight is understood as a general experience that can happen to anyone. Because the non-specific reading is present, the reaction of the people around the speaker to her revelation

³ The term “discourse” is used to refer to a sequence of sentences that are semantically unified. The phenomenon in question occurs with a greater frequency at the level of discourse than at the level of sentence.

⁴ In her paper on extended uses of deictic expressions from the point of view of mental space theory, Rubba (1996) distinguishes two uses of impersonal *you*: “normative use” and “unspecified-role use.” In the normative use, impersonal *you* sets up a normative element in a normative space. In the unspecified-role use, impersonal *you* sets up “an unspecified role” in “a constructed space distinct from R” (Rubba 1996: 256).

The use of impersonal *you* discussed in the present paper may be related to these uses, but it is different from them in some important aspects. Whereas normative *you* designates “a normal individual (252)” who participates in “culturally normal behavior (250),” or “follow[s] the norms for the situation in question (254),” impersonal *you* discussed in the present paper can designate an individual without such a restriction. Impersonal *you* discussed in the present paper also differs from *you* in unspecified-role use, to which no value is assigned, because it is assigned a value at least in one reading. The relation between these uses of impersonal *you* will be the topic of future work.

of childhood plight is attributed to a general human tendency, not to particular characteristics of either the speaker or the people around her.

(3) [She no longer worries that renewed media attention to her childhood plight will color people's current perceptions about her.

"It's inescapable," she says, smiling. "Now, sometimes, I feel it's my duty to talk about it, to bring it up in class (at Berkeley).] (a) But when *I* do, all of a sudden, people look at *you* differently, ((b) But when *I* do, all of a sudden, people look at *me* differently,) [and I hate that because I don't want it to define me.]" (SFC, 5/25/2003, E7)

When the first person singular *me* is substituted for impersonal *you* as in (3b), only the first singular pronouns are used in the sentence. Then only the specific reading is available for them. As a result, (3b) can only be interpreted as portraying a situation that occurs between the speaker and her classmates. As a consequence, in (3b), the reaction of the people who hear her story can be attributed to their personalities, ways of thinking or the speaker's way of talking.⁵

Double interpretation arises not only with respect to impersonal *you*, but also with respect to other expressions used together with impersonal *you*. When *you* is given a specific reading, such expressions as *people* and the subject of the *when* clause are interpreted more specifically. When *you* is given a non-specific reading, such expressions as *people* and the subject of the *when* clause are interpreted less specifically. For example, the subject of the *when* clause is interpreted as referring to a specific individual, the speaker, when *you* is given a specific reading, and a non-specific individual when *you* is given a non-specific reading. The double interpretation available for these expressions as observed here is not easy to account for under the standard analysis where impersonal *you* and other referring expressions are interpreted independently of each other and independently of their function in discourse.

Let us turn to the example of double interpretation at the level of discourse. (4) is an example. The discourse in question consists of sentences ①, ② and ③(a). Impersonal *you* is used in ③(a), while the first person singular *I* is used in ① and interpreted as the semantic subject of ②, a present participle grammatically attached to ①. Here again, both impersonal *you* and the first person singular *I* are interpreted as referring to the same individual and double interpretation is available for them. On the specific reading, they are interpreted as referring to the speaker and the discourse is interpreted as describing a specific experience of the speaker. On the non-specific reading, they are interpreted as referring to a non-specific individual and the discourse is interpreted as describing a general experience that is likely to be shared by other people in his generation.

⁵ The differences between (3a) and (3b) observed here were pointed out to me by Eve Sweetser.

- (4) [For me, it was things I hadn't felt for a while.] ① *I* went through high school and teenage years during the height of the Vietnam War. ② Listening to all those antiwar songs. ③(a) Then *you* get into the work world and forget it. (③(b) Then *I* got into the work world and forgot it.) [Here I was, forced to put work out of my mind for a week. I began to notice some of the feelings coming back that I hadn't felt for a long time.]

(GD: 221)

If we substitute the first person singular *I* for the impersonal *you* as in ③(b), only the specific reading is available for the first person singular pronouns in ①, ②, and ③(b). As a consequence, the discourse consisting of ①, ② and ③(b) can only be interpreted as portraying a specific experience of the speaker.⁶

Section 2 provides a very brief overview of the basic principles and concepts of mental space theory. Section 3 characterizes the double interpretation as observed above and discusses the mechanism that makes such double interpretation possible in the framework of mental space theory. Section 4 is a conclusion.

2. Mental Space Theory

2.1. Basic Concepts of Mental Space Theory

In this section, I will give a brief overview of the basic principles and concepts of mental space theory that will be the basis for the discussion in section 3, based on Fauconnier (1994), Cutrer (1994), Fauconnier (1997), and Fauconnier and Turner (2002).

In mental space theory, it is considered that as discourse unfolds, cognitive domains are set up, structured (filled with elements and the relations holding between the elements) and connected with other cognitive domains. The cognitive domains set up by discourse in this way are called mental spaces (often abbreviated as "spaces").

Mental spaces are cognitive constructs used by the hearers for interpretation of discourse. They are very partial structures that may represent pictures, beliefs, hopes, stories, hypothetical realities, situations located in time or space, etc. (Cutrer 1994: 48). Since they are cognitive constructs, they are not direct representation of the things they represent. A single situation can be represented in mental spaces in different ways depending upon how the speaker wishes to portray it.

A situation in the real world consists of elements and the relation between the elements located in time and space in objective reality. When a specific element in the real world is

⁶ In ③(b), the past tense is substituted for the present tense because the sentence can only be interpreted specifically.

represented as a non-specific element in a mental space, the situation is portrayed as a non-specific space.

When discourse is interpreted, hierarchically structured configuration of spaces is created. A new space is set up relative to another space, which is called a parent space. When no other space is indicated as a parent space, the speaker's reality functions as the default parent space for a new space.

The role of linguistic expressions, in mental space view, is to provide cues for the construction of mental spaces, the internal structuring of spaces, and the establishment of connections between spaces. For example, expressions like *50 years ago, in Tokyo, she believes* cue construction of a new space or point to a space already constructed in the discourse. These expressions are called space-builders. On the other hand, noun phrases contribute to the internal structuring of spaces by serving to set up elements within spaces; indefinite expressions set up new elements in spaces, while definite expressions typically identify existing elements.

Though linguistic expressions provide cues for the construction and structuring of spaces, they provide only partial cues. There are other means by which spaces are constructed, structured or connected. One very important means is mapping. Mapping occurs when correspondences are established between elements and/or relations in different spaces or domains. The structure of one space can be projected onto another space via mapping. Spaces are typically structured by the frames—schematic knowledge we have about our world, i.e., a package of elements and the relations between them that people already know about,—via mapping.

2.2. Specificity of Elements, Situations and Mental Spaces

In this section I will consider how specificity of situations and mental spaces is determined. A situation is captured with respect to three factors: the elements involved in the situation, the relation between the elements, and the location of the relation in time and space. The specificity of a situation can be determined by the degree of specificity with respect to these factors. For example, a situation involving non-specific elements is less specific than a situation involving only specific elements, other things being equal. A situation consisting of specific elements involved in a specific relation located at a specific point in time and space is a situation of high specificity. On the other hand, a situation consisting of non-specific elements involved in non-specific relation located at a non-specific point or range in time and space is a situation of low specificity. A situation is considered to be non-specific when it involves a non-specific element or a non-specific relation, or is located at a non-specific point or range in time or space.

Just as specificity of situations can be determined by three factors, the specificity of a

mental space can be determined by three factors: the specificity of the elements in the space, the specificity of the relation between the elements, and the specificity of the temporal and spatial location of the space. A space containing a non-specific element is less specific than a space containing only specific elements, other things being equal. A space consisting of specific elements involved in a specific relation, located at a specific point in time and space is a space of high specificity. On the other hand, a space consisting of non-specific elements involved in a non-specific relation located at a non-specific point or range in time and space is a space of low specificity. A space is considered to be non-specific when it involves a non-specific element or a non-specific relation, or is located at a non-specific point or range in time or space.

When a situation is specific, the space representing the situation can be specific or non-specific. When a situation is non-specific, the space representing the situation has to be non-specific as well.

3. Account of the Double Interpretation within the Framework of Mental Space Theory

In 3.1, I will discuss how the double interpretation should be characterized in the framework of mental space theory. In 3.2, I will discuss the mechanism that makes the double interpretation possible.

3.1. Characterization of the Double Interpretation

In this section I will discuss how the double interpretation of impersonal *you* and other expressions used together should be characterized and accounted for within the framework of mental space theory. In 3.1.1, I will give a characterization of the double interpretation in terms of mental space configuration. In 3.1.2, I will point out the advantages of our characterization and show how it helps us to account for the various phenomena related to the double interpretation.

3.1.1. Characterization of the Double Interpretation in Terms of Mental Space Configurations

In section 1, I have seen that double interpretation occurs not only with respect to impersonal *you*, but also with respect to other expressions used together. In this section, we argue that double interpretation can be accounted for if we postulate that two sets of mental spaces that differ in the degree of specificity are set up and that impersonal *you* and other expressions can designate elements in different set of spaces at the same time.

Let us consider (3), repeated here, again. In section 1, I have seen that in (3a) both a specific reading and a non-specific reading are assigned to impersonal *you* and other

expressions while in (3b) only a specific reading is assigned to the first person singular pronouns. This difference in interpretation should be characterized in mental space configurations in the following ways: with (3a), two sets of mental spaces differing in the degree of specificity are set up relative to space R, speaker's reality; with (3b) only one set of mental spaces are set up and this set is the same as the more specific set of spaces set up in (3a).

(3) [She no longer worries that renewed media attention to her childhood plight will color people's current perceptions about her.

"It's inescapable," she says, smiling. "Now, sometimes, I feel it's my duty to talk about it, to bring it up in class (at Berkeley).] (a) But when *I* do, all of a sudden, people look at *you* differently, ((b) But when *I* do, all of a sudden, people look at *me* differently,) [and I hate that because I don't want it to define me.]" (SFC, 5/25/2003, E7)

The space configurations that correspond to the interpretation of (3a) and (3b) can be diagrammed as in (5) and (6), respectively. ((5) and (6) are at the end of this paper.) I follow the notation used by Fauconnier (1997). The circles represent mental spaces. The dashed lines from an upper space to a lower space indicate that the lower space is set up relative to the upper space, i.e., the lower space is subordinate to the upper space. The points in the circles represent the elements in the mental spaces. The lines connecting the elements indicate connections between the elements in different spaces. The solid lines indicate identity. The dotted lines indicate correspondences in terms of the role the elements have in the corresponding relations represented in different spaces. The boxes represent internal structure of the spaces.

In the diagram in (5), spaces *w* and *W*, set up relative to space *R*, the speaker's reality, are both structured internally by the same frame "x TELLS y ABOUT x's CHILDHOOD PLIGHT." (Frames are denoted by capitalized words.) This is a default interpretation. Space *W* may be structured by a less specific frame as well. I will discuss this possibility later. Spaces *m* and *M*, set up relative to space *w* and space *W*, respectively, are both structured internally by the same frame "x LOOKS AT y DIFFERENTLY." The difference between spaces *w* and *m*, on the one hand, and spaces *W* and *M*, on the other, is that the latter is less specific than the former with respect to the specificity of the elements in them. On the other hand, in the diagram in (6), only spaces *w* and *m* are set up, and they are structured the same way as the more specific spaces *w* and *m* in the diagram in (5).

The more specific spaces and the less specific spaces set up in the case of double interpretation may differ in specificity with respect to the three factors that determine the specificity of a space discussed in 2.2: the elements in the spaces, the relation between the elements and its location in time and space. The more specific space is always more specific

with respect to the specificity of one corresponding set of elements because it is always the case that one element in the more specific space is the speaker, a specific individual, while the corresponding element in the less specific space is a non-specific individual. In (3a), it is the case that the other corresponding set of elements also differs in specificity. This may not always be the case with double interpretation.

Specificity of the spaces may differ also with respect to the relations between the elements. By default, both the more specific spaces and the less specific spaces are structured by the same frame. However, the less specific spaces may be structured by less specific frames. In (3a), for example, the implied human tendency could be a general tendency for us to start looking at someone differently after their revelation of their past, one's childhood plight being just one possible aspect of one's past. In this case, space W is structured by the frame "x TELLS y x's PAST," which is less specific than the frame "x TELLS y x's CHILDHOOD PLIGHT."

Thirdly, the less specific space may be located at a less specific point or range in time or space. For example, in (4), the less specific spaces are located in a non-specific range in time, as cued by the generic present tense in ③.

The specificity of the spaces is "negotiable." Because the degree of specificity of non-specific spaces is generally underspecified, the degree of specificity of the spaces each hearer chooses to set up can differ depending upon what they think is relevant. Thus, there can be some variation in interpretation between different hearers.

3.1.2. Advantages of the Characterization in the Framework of Mental Space Theory

The above characterization of the double interpretation in the framework of mental space theory has the following three advantages. First of all, it can explain the fact that the first person singular *I* and impersonal *you* are interpreted as referring to the same individual: a specific individual (the speaker) in the specific reading, and a non-specific individual in the non-specific reading. This fact can be attributed to the identity relation between the elements they serve to set up in different spaces. The identity relation in the specific reading holds between the corresponding elements in the more specific spaces; the identity relation in the non-specific reading holds between the corresponding elements in the less specific spaces. In the diagrams, identity relations between elements are indicated by solid lines connecting the elements in the more specific spaces *w* and *m* and the lines connecting the elements in the less specific spaces *W* and *M*.

Secondly, this characterization enables us to account for the fact that impersonal *you* and the first person singular *I* can be assigned a specific reading and a non-specific reading. This can be attributed to the fact that they are used in designating different elements in spaces of differing specificity. In the specific reading, they designate a specific element in the more

specific space; in the non-specific reading, they designate a non-specific element in the less specific space.

Thirdly, this characterization can explain the fact that double interpretation arises not only with respect to impersonal *you* and the first person singular *I*, but also with respect to other expressions used with them and the relation between the elements and the location of the relation in time or space. When the non-specific individual designated by impersonal *you* and the first person singular *I* is involved in a relation with other elements, it is likely for the other elements to be less specific than their counterparts in the more specific spaces that are involved in a relation with the speaker, a specific individual. The relation between the less specific elements may be less specific and may exist over a less specific range of time.⁷

3.2. Mechanism Which Allows Double Interpretation

In this section I will discuss the mechanism that allows the construction of the mental space configuration discussed in 3.1. Construction of a mental space configuration in general involves three aspects: construction of spaces, internal structuring of the spaces and the establishment of connections between the spaces. Though the exact process through which the mental space configuration involved in double interpretation is outside the scope of this paper, the following are essential aspects of the process of the construction of the mental space configuration in question.

- i) Construction of two sets of spaces differing in the degree of specificity
- ii) Internal structuring of the constructed sets of spaces by projection of a frame accessed through combination of frames brought in by the clauses
- iii) Establishment of connections between spaces

Let us examine each aspect in turn.

- i) Construction of two sets of spaces differing in the degree of specificity

In double interpretation, construction of two sets of spaces differing in the degree of specificity is essential. For this, we need to consider the function of impersonal *you* and the grammatical structure of the sentence or discourse in question. First, a space containing the speaker as an element is set up. Then, impersonal *you* that functions as a cue to set up a non-specific element, serves as a cue to construct a less specific space that contains a non-specific element. Impersonal *you* thus functions as a space builder. Second, grammatical structure functions as a cue to set up a schematic space configuration and this schematic configuration is projected onto the more specific and the less specific spaces.

⁷ This characterization also enables us to account for the fact that the degree of specificity in interpretation can differ between different hearers. Mental space approach allows such variation as something to be expected because in this approach the degree of specificity of the (non-specific) spaces that each hearer chooses to set up is expected to differ because it is underspecified.

Let us go back to (3a) and see how its more specific and less specific spaces can be constructed. In (3a), a time space *w* is set up relative to space *R*, the speaker's reality, and internally structured by the structure (the elements and the frame) brought in by the *when* clause. Also, a less specific mental space *M* is set up relative to space *w* cued by impersonal *you* and internally structured by the structure brought in by the main clause. (In other words, linguistically (3a) represents only two spaces: space *w*, a specific space, and space *M*, a generic space.) At the same time, the grammatical structure *when* clause + main clause cues construction of a schematic mental space configuration consisting of a schematic time space *w*, and a schematic space *m*, set up relative to space *w*. I will represent the configuration consisting of spaces *w* and *m* as [*w*, *m*]. The schematic configuration [*w*, *m*] is projected onto the linguistically constructed configuration [*w*, *M*], and configuration [*w*, *m*] consisting of a set of more specific spaces and configuration [*W*, *M*] consisting of a set of less generic spaces are built up.

- ii) Internal structuring of the constructed sets of space configurations by projection of a frame accessed through combination of frames brought in by the clauses

Internal structuring of the constructed space configurations involves three steps: accessing of a frame to structure the configurations and projection of the accessed frame onto the configurations, and filling the roles with elements

Each clause brings in a frame and the frames combine to bring in a new frame from the background knowledge. In (3a), the frame "x TELLS y ABOUT x's CHILDHOOD PLIGHT" and the frame "x LOOKS AT y DIFFERENTLY" combine to bring in a new frame "WHEN x TELLS y ABOUT x's CHILDHOOD PLIGHT, y LOOKS AT x DIFFERENTLY" from the background knowledge because it is a familiar enough scenario to be stored in the background knowledge.

The newly accessed frame is projected onto both the more specific and the less specific space configurations. Thus the more specific space configuration and the less specific space configuration are internally structured by the newly accessed frame. In (3a), the newly accessed frame "WHEN x TELLS y ABOUT x's CHILDHOOD PLIGHT, y LOOKS AT x DIFFERENTLY" is projected onto both the more specific space configuration [*w*, *m*] and the less specific space configuration [*W*, *M*] via mapping.

The roles in the frame are filled in via mapping between the more specific spaces *w* and *m* and via mapping between the less specific spaces *W* and *M*. In (3a), the roles in the frame projected onto the more specific spaces are filled by the speaker and her classmates mapped from space *w*, and the roles in the frame projected onto the less specific spaces are filled by a non-specific individual and people around the non-specific individual mapped from space *M*. As a result, space *m* and space *W* are structured internally as described in 3.1, even though they are not explicitly represented by linguistic expressions.

- iii) Establishment of connections between spaces

Elements filling in the more specific spaces and the less specific spaces are different but they correspond with each other in terms of the roles they play in the frame. Thus connections are established between spaces *w* and *W*, and between spaces *m* and *M*. Identity of the elements in spaces *w* and *m* and in spaces *W* and *M* is established as well. In (3a), correspondences are made between the speaker and a non-specific person, and between the speaker's classmates and people around a non-specific person in question with respect to the role they play in the frame.

In the case of double interpretation at the level of discourse, basically the same operations are at work. The more specific spaces are constructed by default and impersonal *you* cues construction of less specific spaces. (A schematic mental space configuration may be constructed by linguistic cues like *then* in (4). Then it is projected onto both the more specific spaces and the less specific spaces. Thus the more specific mental space configuration and the less specific space configuration are set up.) The frames the utterances bring in combine to access a new frame from the background knowledge. This newly accessed frame is projected onto both the more specific mental spaces and the less specific mental spaces. Connections between spaces are established by correspondences between elements playing the same roles in the frame and identity of elements in different spaces.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have examined the phenomenon of double interpretation: impersonal *you* and the first person singular *I* used together within the same sentence or discourse which refer to the same individual are assigned referents that differ in the degree of specificity. I have shown that double interpretation results from the construction of a mental space configuration consisting of two sets of mental spaces differing in the degree of specificity set up relative to a parent space. This characterization serves to explain the degree of specificity of impersonal *you* and the first person singular *I* that refer to the same individual. I have shown that impersonal *you* can function as a less specific space builder.

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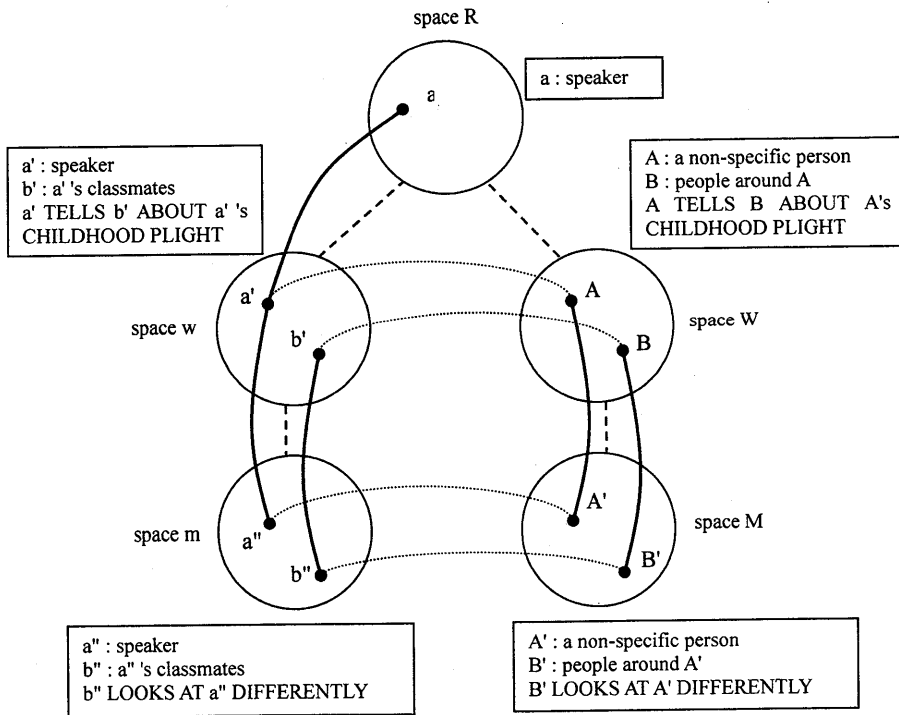
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(5) When I do, all of a sudden, people look at you differently



(6) When I do, all of a sudden, people look at me differently

