

Personal Pronouns

Preliminary Notes - For Lectures - Please Watch for errors

Personal pronouns are words that are used to take the place of nouns. After the speaker has made reference to a noun, then a pronoun can be substituted for that noun from then on in the discourse. A personal pronoun carries somewhat different information from the noun it replaces. The most important feature of a personal pronoun is that it indicates the perspective of the speaker. Here are some examples in English of perspective. The noun we will be replacing is "John".

"John is a nice man."

If the speaker is talking to someone about John, then there are three people involved in the perspective: the speaker, the listener, and a third person "John". We can replace "John" with "he".

"He is a nice man."

The perspective of the speaker in relationship to John is remote. John is a third party not involved in the conversation. The perspective of the pronoun "he" shows "about". This is called "third person".

If John is being addressed directly, then the perspective of the speaker is one in which John and the speaker are in contact with each other. There are only two people involved in the situation, and John is the second person. We replace "John" with "you".

"You are a nice man."

The pronoun "you" is called second person. The perspective of the pronoun "you" shows "to".

If the noun being replaced is also the name of the speaker, then a pronoun is used to indicate that John and the speaker are one in the same:

"I am a nice man."

"I" is used to replace "John". There is only one person involved in this act, and John is it. This is called first person. The perspective of "first person" is "self".

The following is a chart of the above information:

I	1st person	the pronoun indicates the noun is equal to the speaker	"self"
you	2nd person	the pronoun indicates the noun is being addressed	"to"
he	3rd person	the pronoun indicates the noun is being referred to	"about"

We can make a further distinction in the third person, one of gender. If the noun is feminine, we replace it with "she", and if the noun is neuter, we replace it with "it". In German, all nouns, regardless of whether they are people or not, have gender. Each noun must take a gender appropriate pronoun. Example: the word for "table" (Tisch) in German is masculine. The pronoun to replace "table" must also be masculine. The German word for "child" (Kind) is neuter and must be replaced with a neuter pronoun.

The German equivalents to the above mentioned pronouns are:

I	ich	he (it)	er
you	du	she (it)	sie
		it	es (er, sie)

Notice that all of the above pronouns are singular, that is they are replacing only one thing. Notice also that the pronoun "ich" is not capitalized.

If the noun is plural, then the pronoun must also agree in number with the noun being replaced. Let us take the example "John and Mary are nice." To indicate that there are multiple nouns being replaced we use the pronoun "they". This is third person plural pronoun.

"They are nice".

If we put "John and Mary" into second person, we obtain the following sentence.

"You are nice".

Notice that English does not make a distinction between singular and plural in the second person. Some dialects try to make this distinction.

"You guys are nice." · "Y'all are nice."

These are all methods that incorporate some kind of plural marker in the second person. German has a fully incorporated second person plural which must always be used when the pronoun is plural.

There is also first person plural.

"We are nice"

Here John and Mary are both speaking. "We" is the first person plural pronoun.

These are the plural personal pronouns in German:

we	wir
y'all (you guys)	ihr (used with a group of people on a first name basis)
they	sie

The technical term for the distinction between singular and plural is called "number".

There is an additional feature in German to the pronoun system. This is one of register (degree of formality). If the second person pronoun is used and the speaker feels distance or unfamiliarity with the person being spoken to, then a special pronoun indicating formal register is used. This pronoun is "Sie". Notice that "Sie" is always capitalized. "Sie" functions as both singular and plural. There is no exact equivalent in English to this pronoun. The German pronoun "Sie" means "you" but when speaking to someone on a last name basis.

Here is now the entire set of pronouns in German with their English equivalents. These are the nominative forms only. (Other case forms are listed below.)

	singular		plural	
1st person	ich	I	wir	we
2nd familiar	du	you (first name basis)	ihr	y'all (you guys)
2nd formal	Sie	you (last name basis)	Sie	you
3rd masculine	er	he	sie	they
3rd feminine	sie	she		
3rd neuter	es	it		

Notice that several of the pronouns have the same form "sie". Only the verb conjugation will show a difference between feminine and plural, and only the capitalization shows a difference between formal "you" and plural. Notice also that there is no gender distinction in the plural.

It is important to note that all of these pronouns also show case grammar. Here is a chart listing the various forms of the pronouns and their cases. The arrangement of the pronouns has been somewhat simplified.

	<i>Nominative</i>	<i>Accusative</i>	<i>Dative</i>
singular pronouns			
I / me / to me, for me	ich	mich	mir
you / you / to you, for you (familiar)	du	dich	dir
you / you / to you, for you (formal)	Sie	Sie	Ihnen
he / him / to him	er	ihn	ihm
she / her / to her	sie	sie	ihr
it / it / to it	es	es	ihm
plural pronouns			
we / us / to us	wir	uns	uns
you / you / to you, for you (familiar)	ihr	euch	euch
you / you / to you, for you (formal)	Sie	Sie	Ihnen
they / them / to them	sie	sie	ihnen