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A first approach to ἡμεῖς in place of ἐγώ in Sophocles and Euripides: A deactualising device and expression of self-dignity

Luz Conti
(Autonomous University of Madrid)

Abstract

This paper focuses on the use of ἡμεῖς in place of ἐγώ in Eurpides' *Alcestis*, *Electra*, and *Medea* and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Philoctetes*. As the data reveal, ἡμεῖς functions as a strategy to both reinforce the speaker's *I* and blur the identity of the person or group associated with the speaker. Contrary to the claim of some scholars, ἡμεῖς does not seem to be particularly connected with female speech. In the analysed tragedies, ἡμεῖς tends to co-occur with expressions of non-actuality and may be interpreted as a deactualising device. Furthermore, the use of ἡμεῖς is linked to a pragmatic meaning of self-dignity.

Introduction

In natural languages, *we* forms generally refer to one speaker and someone else.[1] In addition to the speaker, either one or more addressees (1+2: *Mary, hurry up, we are going to be late for the movie.*) or one or more associates (1+3: *Mary, we'll go out now. You have food in the fridge.*) are also involved in the verbal action. The combination of the speaker, one or more addressees, and one or more associates (1+2+3) is also relatively frequent (cf. *We will overcome this crisis of confidence in Europe*).

Pronouns and personal verb endings often display non-prototypical uses that imply both changes in their deictic and referential values and the emergence of new pragmatic meanings.[2] In their non-prototypical uses, *we* forms can refer either to a group that does not include the speaker or to a single person (the speaker, the addressee, or a third person). Interestingly, non-prototypical uses of *we* forms seem to be connected to two rather opposite pragmatic meanings: closeness to the addressee and distance from the addressee.[3]

Comparable to other old Indo-European languages, Ancient Greek does not differentiate either morphologically or lexically between inclusive values (inclusion of the addressee) and exclusive values (exclusion of the addressee). The use of ἡμεῖς forms[4] as a reference to a single speaker is documented as early as Homer. A sociative, that is, an inclusive meaning is attributed to these earliest examples of ἡμεῖς in exchange for ἐγώ, which grammars interpret to be expressions of modesty and solidarity.[5] A distancing use of ἡμεῖς (*pluralis maiestatis*, or the royal we) has been described in contrast to the sociative use, as a later phenomenon that did not crystallise until the Hellenistic period.[6]

Grammars draw attention to the use of ἡμεῖς instead of ἐγώ in tragedy and comedy, interpreting it as a sign of modesty[7] and as a characteristic of female speech.[8] As we see in the following passage,[9] the speaker often switches from singular to plural or vice versa:[10]

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1   We forms rarely refer to two or more people speaking in unison.

2   Helmbrecht (2015: p. 178).

3   Cf. § 1.1. See Siewierska (2004: p. 218) and Helmbrecht (2015: pp. 182–184).

4   "ἡμεῖς forms" and "ἡμεῖς" are used here in reference to first-person plural pronouns, first-person plural verb endings, and first-person plural possessives.

5   Cf., Kühner & Gerth (1898: p. 83), and Schwyzer & Debrunner (1950: p. 243), among others.

6   Cf. Wackernagel (1924: p. 100) and Schwyzer & Debrunner (1950: pp. 243–244).

7   Cf. Slotty (1927a: pp. 161-162; 1927b: pp. 375-359).

8   Cf. Schwyzer & Debrunner (1950: p. 243), among others.

9   The data was sought and compiled using the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae, A Digital Library of Greek Literature* (http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/Iris/inst/tsearch.jsp). Translations by Greek authors were taken from the digital edition of the Loeb Classical Library. Specification has been made in cases where the excerpts were translated by this paper's author or where the original translations were slightly modified.

10 Observe the juxtaposition between μαρτυρόμεσθα and δρῶσα. As Bond (1981: p. 289) indicates commenting this verse, discords between plural and singular forms are more frequent in Euripides than in Sophocles. On the switching between plural and singular, see also Battezzato (2018: p. 110, E. *Hec*. 244, and p. 181, E. *Hec*. 806-808).

(1) Ἤλιον **μαρτυρόμεσθα δρῶσ'** ἃ δρᾶν οὐ **βούλομαι** (E. *HF* 858) '**I call** the sun-god to witness that here **I am acting** against **my will**.' (Lyssa to Iris)

1. Rethinking ἡμεῖς in place of ἐγώ

To date, this approach to the use of ἡμεῖς in place of ἐγώ has been widely accepted, either explicitly or implicitly. Nevertheless, it presents some issues that require further analysis.

First, even as early as Homer, we find examples in which the analysis of ἡμεῖς forms, as an inclusive designation, is not compatible with the context. As we see in passages like the following, the speaker is referring exclusively to himself/herself, clearly excluding his/her addressee. In doing so, the speaker tries to establish or maintain distance from his/her addressee. This use of the plural form clearly draws on the exclusive value of ἡμεῖς:[11]

(2) τὴν δ' ἐγὼ οὐ λύσω· πρίν μιν καὶ γῆρας ἔπεισιν / **ἡμετέρῳ ἐνὶ οἴκῳ** ἐν Ἄργεϊ τηλόθι πάτρης (Hom. *Il*. 1.29-30) 'I will not free her. She shall grow old **in my house** at Argos far from her own home.' (Agamemnon to Chryses)

Second, the use of ἡμεῖς instead of ἐγώ is far from being an exclusive feature of female speech in Homer, as the previous example illustrates, or in later authors:[12]

(3) ὅθεν οὖν **ἡμεῖς** τε ῥᾷστα **διδάξομεν** καὶ ὑμεῖς μαθήσεσθε, ἐντεῦθεν ὑμῖν ἄρξομαι διηγεῖσθαι (Lys. 13.4) '**I shall** therefore **start my relation** at a point from which it will be easiest both for me to explain and for you to understand.' (The prosecutor to the judges, finishing the proem)

In tragedy, the use of ἡμεῖς instead of ἐγώ is only occasionally observed.[13] The analysis of ἡμεῖς as a pronoun with an inclusive value is tenable in some cases, such as (4). As we see, Orestes may be referring exclusively to himself. In this case, he would use ἡμεῖς as a strategy to create a sense of fellowship and, therefore, identify his own interests with those of the old servant.[14] However, we cannot rule out Orestes' use of ἡμεῖς to refer to both himself and the old servant since he clearly expects the servant of Agamemnon to join his cause:

(4) **ἡμῖν** ἂν εἶεν, εἰ **κρατοῖμεν**, εὐμενεῖς; (E. *El*. 632) 'Would they be well disposed **to me / us**, if **I / we should prevail**?[15]' (Orestes to Agamemnon's old servant)

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11 Obviously, Agamemnon is not interested in creating a climate of collaboration with Chryses. On the pragmatic meanings of the exclusive ἡμεῖς in *The Iliad*, see Conti (forthcoming).

12 Nevertheless, recent studies also seem to assume a relationship between the use of ἡμεῖς in place of ἐγώ and female speech (see, Bruno 2017: p. 452, f. 24).

13 Cf. fn. 19.

14 On the use of the inclusive ἡμεῖς as a positive politeness strategy see Lloyd (2006: p. 227), among others.

15 Loeb translation, slightly modified.

As this paper will demonstrate, in tragedy, ἡμεῖς is used as an expression of ἐγώ, generally with an exclusive value.[16]

2. Data analysis

This paper focuses on three of Euripides' tragedies, *Alcestis*, *Electra*, and *Medea*, and two tragedies by Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Philoctetes*. These plays were selected due to the disparate roles of their female characters and the different backgrounds in which their narratives were set. A woman is the main character in *Medea* and, to some extent, in *Electra*.[17] In contrast, the women are minor characters in *Alcestis* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, and they have no role at all in the plot of *Philoctetes*. With respect to the background, *Philoctetes* differs from other tragedies in its absence of a palace setting and royal figures exercising their power.

All forms of first-person plural pronouns, possessive adjectives and pronouns, and verb forms in the first-person plural were analysed. Uses of the first person instead of the second or third person were not taken into account. The study focused exclusively on examples that allowed for an interpretation of ἡμεῖς as an unequivocal expression of ἐγώ:

(5) ὅσ' ἂν **λέγωμεν** πάνθ' ὁρῶντα **λέξομεν** (S. *OC* 74) 'In all that **I speak** there will be vision.' (Oedipus to the sceptical citizen of Colonus)

At the first glance, in passages like (5), ἡμεῖς seems to function as an expression of distance from the addressee. In other passages, the speaker is likely to use ἡμεῖς instead of ἐγώ to simultaneously express two opposite pragmatic values: distance from the addressee and proximity to one or more associates, whether absent or present. In the following excerpt, for example, Theseus is referring to himself, but his words also evoke a clear association between the king and his people. Theseus thus presents himself as the voice of all Athenians, distancing himself from Oedipus, his addressee. In fact, Theseus chooses to use plural forms when he translates his feelings at that moment into essential features of his personality that could also define the Athenians:

(6) οὔτ' εἴ τι μῆκος τῶν λόγων ἔθου πλέον, / τέκνοισι τερφθεὶς τοῖσδε, θαυμάσας ἔχω, / οὐδ' εἰ πρὸ τοὐμοῦ προὔλαβες τὰ τῶνδ' ἔπη. / βάρος γὰρ **ἡμᾶς** οὐδὲν ἐκ τούτων ἔχει. / οὐ γὰρ λόγοισι τὸν βίον **σπουδάζομεν** / λαμπρὸν ποεῖσθαι μᾶλλον ἢ τοῖς δρωμένοις. / **δείκνυμι** δ'· ὧν γὰρ ὤμοσ' οὐκ ἐψευσάμην / οὐδέν σε, πρέσβυ... (S. *OC* 1139-1146) 'I feel no amazement, if you have had a lengthy conversation from joy in these children, or if your first concern has been for their words rather than for me. Indeed, there is nothing to vex **us** in that. Not with words so much as with deeds **would**

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16 As grammars point out (see fn. 5), in Homer, the speaker does refer relatively often to himself/herself using ἡμεῖς with an inclusive value: ἠράμεθα μέγα κῦδος· ἐπέφνομεν Ἕκτορα δῖον (Hom. *Il.* 22. 393) 'We have won us great glory; **we have slain** goodly Hector.' (Achilles to the Achaeans).

17 *Antigone* was analysed by Bruno (2017).

we add luster to life. You have this proof: I have cheated you in none of my sworn promises, old man.'[18]

Here, we likely have the origin of the use of ἡμεῖς instead of ἐγώ as a distancing expression that conveys no nuances of proximity to anyone: *expression of distance from the addressee + proximity to one or more associates → expression of distance from the addressee without evident nuances of proximity to any associate.*

2.1 Speech acts and rapport orientation

In the tragedies studied, the unequivocal use of ἡμεῖς in place of ἐγώ is documented in 90 examples.[19] ἡμεῖς is primarily observed in assertive speech acts, but also in commissives, expressives, and performatives;[20] all of which are speaker-oriented speech acts.[21] In the majority of cases, the speaker describes a real, possible, or unreal situation, speculates about it, and expresses his/her plans:

(7) τί δ'; αἰχμάλωτόν τοί μ' ἀπώικισας δόμων, / ἠιρημένων δὲ δωμάτων **ἠιρήμεθα**, / ὡς αἵδε, πατρὸς **ὀρφανοὶ λελειμμένοι** (E. *El.* 1008–1010) 'What? You sent me away from home, a captive; **I was taken** when my home was taken, like these, orphaned of a father.'[22] (Electra to Clytemnestra)

In terms of the speaker's interest in his/her rapport with the addressee, the use of ἡμεῖς as an expression of ἐγώ is primarily related to two different rapport attitudes: maintenance and neglect.[23] Rapport maintenance corresponds to the speaker's desire to ensure harmonious relations. In contrast, rapport neglect is an indifference towards support or redress of the addressee's faces. In both rapport maintenance and rapport neglect, the speaker frequently has a strong interest, not only in preserving the independence between *I* and *you* but in reinforcing his/her *I* through a real or metaphorical association with a third person or group.

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18   Loeb translation, slightly modified.

19   *Alc.* 49, *Alc.* 70, *Alc.* 383, *Alc.* 536, *Alc.* 626, *Alc.* 680, *Alc.* 686, *Alc.* 704, *Alc.* 718, *Alc.* 795, *Alc.* 1109, *El.* 34, *El.* 74, *El.* 245, *El.* 597, *El.* 784, *El.* 837, *El.* 895, *El.* 912, *El.* 1009, *El.* 1015, *El.* 1018, *El.* 1116, *Med.* 307, *Med.* 315, *Med.* 334 (3x), *Med.* 338, *Med.* 341, *Med.* 467, *Med.* 488, *Med.* 489, *Med.* 616, *Med.* 617 (x2), *Med.* 671, *Med.* 673, *Med.* 676, *Med.* 694, *Med.* 696, *Med.* 770, *Med.* 778, *Med.* 792, *Med.* 802, *Med.* 821, *Med.* 881, *Med.* 892 (2x), *Med.* 896, *Med.* 938, *Med.* 962, *Med.* 968, *Med.* 1058, *Med.* 1063 (3x), *Med.* 1135, *Med.* 1241 (3x; = 1063), *Med.* 1322, *OC* 74 (2x), *OC* 241, *OC* 347, *OC* 414, *OC* 1037, *OC* 1142, *OC* 1143, *OC* 1327, *OC* 1335, *OC* 1401, *OC* 1429, *OC* 1539, *Ph.* 12, *Ph.* 65, *Ph.* 404, *Ph.* 738, *Ph.* 810, *Ph.* 995, *Ph.* 1288, *Ph.* 1364, *Ph.* 1393 (2x), *Ph.* 1394, *Ph.* 1409, *Ph.* 1458, *Ph.* 1462 (2x). These figures are quite low in comparison with respect to ἐγώ. In *Alcestis* alone, for example, there are 167 occurrences of ἐγώ.

20   As per Searle's classification of speech acts (Searle 1975: pp. 354–361). Assertives and commissives are found in 65 examples; expressives, in 6; performatives or declarations, in 3.

21   Directives, which are addressee-oriented, are documented in 16 passages.

22   Loeb translation, slightly modified.

23   On the concept *rapport orientation* and its implications, see Culpeper & Qian (2020: p. 762), among others.

Rapport maintenance is observed in contexts in which the characters express their thoughts or exchange information. Often, the characters are simply following expected politeness rules:

(8) **ΑΙ.** Μήδεια, χαῖρε· τοῦδε γὰρ προοίμιον / κάλλιον οὐδεὶς οἶδε προσφωνεῖν φίλους. / **ΜΗ.** ὦ χαῖρε καὶ σύ, παῖ σοφοῦ Πανδίονος, / Αἰγεῦ. πόθεν γῆς τῆσδ' ἐπιστρωφᾶι πέδον; / **ΑΙ.** Φοίβου παλαιὸν **ἐκλιπὼν** χρηστήριον. **ΜΗ.** τί δ' ὀμφαλὸν γῆς θεσπιωιδὸν ἐστάλης; / **ΑΙ.** παίδων ἐρευνῶν σπέρμ' ὅπως γένοιτό **μοι**. / **ΜΗ.** πρὸς θεῶν, ἄπαις γὰρ δεῦρ' ἀεὶ τείνεις βίον; / **ΑΙ.** **ἄπαιδές ἐσμεν** δαίμονός τινος τύχηι. (E. *Med.* 667–671) 'AE. – Medea, I wish you joy: no one knows a better way than this to address a friend. ME. – Joy to you as well, Aegeus, son of wise Pandion! Where have you come from to be visiting the soil of this land? AE. – I have come from the ancient oracle of Phoebus. ME. – Why did you go to earth's prophetic center? AE. – To inquire how I might get offspring. ME. – Have you really lived so long a life without children? AE. – **I am** childless: it is the act of some god.'

Rapport neglect is characteristic of confrontational contexts. In a competitive scenario, the speaker defends his/her arguments and criticises the addressee's attitude. The following fragment of dialogue between Pheres and Admetus, in which Pheres reacts to strong criticism from Admetus, is a good example of rapport neglect. As we will see, Pheres presents *I* and *you* not only as independent but also as opposed to each other. The ἡμεῖς form emerges when he refers to his obligations in his role as father:

(9) ὦ παῖ, τίν' αὐχεῖς, πότερα Λυδὸν ἢ Φρύγα / κακοῖς ἐλαύνειν ἀργυρώνητον σέθεν; / οὐκ οἶσθα Θεσσαλόν με κἀπὸ Θεσσαλοῦ / πατρὸς γεγῶτα γνησίως ἐλεύθερον; / ἄγαν ὑβρίζεις καὶ νεανίας λόγους / ῥίπτων ἐς ἡμᾶς οὐ βαλὼν οὕτως ἄπει. / ἐγὼ δέ σ' οἴκων δεσπότην ἐγεινάμην / κἄθρεψ', ὀφείλω δ' οὐχ ὑπερθνήισκειν σέθεν· / οὐ γὰρ πατρῶιον τόνδ' ἐδεξάμην νόμον, / παίδων προθνήισκειν πατέρας, οὐδ' Ἑλληνικόν. / σαυτῶι γὰρ εἴτε δυστυχὴς εἴτ' εὐτυχὴς / ἔφυς· ἃ δ' **ἡμῶν** χρῆν σε τυγχάνειν ἔχεις (E. *Alc.* 677-686) 'Son, whom do you imagine you are berating with insults, some Lydian or Phrygian slave of yours, bought with money? Do you not know that I am a freeborn Thessalian, legitimately begotten of a Thessalian father? You go too far in insult, and since you hurl brash words at me, you will not get off with impunity. I begot you and raised you to be the master of this house, but I am not obliged to die for you. I did not inherit this as a family custom, fathers dying for sons, nor as a Greek custom either. For you are happy or unhappy for yourself alone. What you should in justice have received **from me** you have.'

2.2 Character interaction

ἡμεῖς is regularly used by characters with high social status.[24] ἡμεῖς primarily emerges when these characters of high social rank, in the exercise of power or not, interact with each other.

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24   Divinities also use ἡμεῖς forms instead of ἐγώ (see Table 1).

ἡμεῖς is seen only scarcely when characters of a high social rank interact with characters of lower status (e.g. the chorus, the coryphaeus, or some of the servants).[25] Besides, servants, coryphaei, and characters from humbler backgrounds do not use ἡμεῖς to express ἐγώ.[26] Interestingly, some of them speak more lines than upper-class characters that do use ἡμεῖς to refer to themselves.

2.2.1 The use of ἡμεῖς instead of ἐγώ: a question of gender?

To assess the existence of a possible association between ἡμεῖς as an expression of ἐγώ and female speech, we must analyse the number of occurrences of this usage of ἡμεῖς in women's dialogue and must also include a statistical comparison between the number of lines uttered by each character – male or female – in his/her respective play.[27]

The following table presents the results of the analysis performed on the selected tragedies. It shows the total number of lines in each play, the total number of lines spoken by the characters -male and female - who use ἡμεῖς instead of ἐγώ, and the number of times each character uses ἡμεῖς instead of ἐγώ:

Alcestis (1163 lines)	*Electra* (1359 lines)	*Medea* (1419 lines)	*Oedipus at Colonus* (1779 lines)	*Philoctetes* (1471 lines)
Alcestis 82 lines **1×**	**Aegisthus**[28] 22 lines **1×**	**Aegeus** 34 lines **2×**	**Antigone** 183 lines **1×**	**Heracles** 39 lines **1×**
Admetus 341 lines **1×**	**Clytemnestra** 75 lines **2×**	**Jason** 143 lines **3×**	**Creon** 102 lines **1×**	**Neoptolemus** 382 lines **4×**
Apollo 48 lines **1×**	**Electra** 554 lines **8×**	**Medea** 567 lines **44×**	**Oedipus** 626 lines **5×**	**Odysseus** 162 lines **2×**
Pheres 60 lines **5×**	**Orestes** 222 lines **8×**		**Polynices** 125 lines **4×**	**Philoctetes** 720 lines **9×**
Heracles 185 lines **3×**	**Peasant** 90 lines **1×**		**Theseus** 196 lines (11.01 %) **2×**	
Thanatos 28 lines **1×**				

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25 *El.* 837, *Med.* 770, *Med.* 792, *Med.* 802, *Med.* 821, *Med.* 1135, *Med.* 1241, *OC* 74 and *OC* 1017.

26 The only exception seems to be the peasant in *Electra*, who refers to himself with a ἡμεῖς form once (*El.* 34). However, it should be borne in mind that, as the peasant himself points out (*El.* 35–38), he was born in a family of noble status. In contrast to the tragedies analysed, in other plays the messenger occasionally does use ἡμεῖς to refer to himself/herself (De Jong 1991: pp. 3–5).

27 On the application of statistics to the study of female speech features and its relevance cf. Sommerstein (2009: p. 15), among others.

28 Aegisthus' words are reproduced by the messenger.

The following percentage scale, from greatest to least, was obtained via comparative analysis and shows the percentage of lines spoken by each character in the relevant play that uses ἡμεῖς instead of ἐγώ:

1. Pheres: 8.33% **2.** Medea: 7.86% **3.** Aegeus: 5.88% **4.** Aegisthus: 4.54% **5.** Orestes: 3.6% **6.** Thanatos: 3.57% **7.** Polynices: 3.2% **8.** Clytemnestra: 2.66% **9.** Heracles (*Ph.*): 2.56% **10.** Jason: 2.09% **11.** Apollo: 2.08% **12.** Heracles (*Alc.*): 1.62% **13.** Electra: 1.44% **14.** Philoctetes: 1.25% **15.** Odysseus: 1.23% **16.** Alcestis: 1.21% **17.** Peasant: 1.11% **18.** Theseus 1.02% **19.** Creon (*OC*): 0.98% **20.** Oedipus: 0.79% **21.** Neoptolemus: 0.78% **22.** Antigone: 0.54% **23.** Admetus: 0.29%

The data presented allows us to conclude that the use of ἡμεῖς as an expression of ἐγώ is unlikely to be a feature of female speech in the material studied. Moreover, except for Medea, the female characters in the tragedies analysed do not use ἡμεῖς to refer to themselves particularly often.[29]

In any event, as a general rule, the use of ἡμεῖς instead of ἐγώ seems to be triggered by interactional factors, namely common ground,[30] context, and the speaker's specific intentions.

2.3 ἡμεῖς: a deactualising device

As Pieroni (2010) and Bruno (2017) observed in both Latin and Greek, the use of first-person plural forms instead of first-person singular forms seems to be closely related to the description of non-actual states of affairs. The relationship between *we* forms and non-actual states of affairs is interpreted by both Pieroni and Bruno as an indicator of the non-referential and non-deictic status of *we* forms in these contexts. Thus, *we* is not a real expression of the uttering *I*, but a "non-person" detached from every coordinate of the utterance, that is, a projection of the uttering *I* onto the discourse.[31]

In the material analysed, ἡμεῖς is documented mostly in sentences or clauses that refer to a non-actual state of affairs, that is, a probable, possible, counterfactual, or non-present state of affairs:[32]

(10) **ΝΕ**. θάρσει, **μενοῦμεν. ΦΙ**. ἦ μενεῖς; (S. *Ph.* 810) '**ΝΕ.** – Take heart. **We will remain**. **PH.** – Will you?'

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29 On the contrary to its use instead of ἐγώ, the inclusive use of ἡμεῖς seems to be typical of female speech (Mc Clure 1995: p. 57; Willi 2003: p. 194; Meluzzi 2016). Indeed, it is generally accepted that female speech is collaborative and sympathetic.

30 "Common ground" comprises "mutual knowledge, mutual beliefs, and mutual assumptions" (cf. Clark & Carlson 1982).

31 Pieroni (2010: p. 610) and Bruno (2017: p. 532).

32 In natural languages, non-actuality is related to negative polarity, potentials, conditionals, commands, habituals, and interrogatives.

ἡμεῖς is sometimes connected to a non-actual state of affairs and ἐγώ, in contrast, to an actual one:

(11) **ἔχω** τι **κἀγὼ** τοῖσι σοῖς ἐναντίον / λόγοισιν εἰπεῖν. ἀλλὰ μὴ σπέρχου, φίλος, / λέξον δέ· πῶς ὤλοντο; δὶς τόσον γὰρ **ἂν** / **τέρψειας ἡμᾶς**, εἰ τεθνᾶσι παγκάκως (E. *Med.* 1132–1135) '**I too have** something that I could say in reply to your words. Do not be hot and hasty, friend, but tell me: how did they die? You will give **us** twice **the pleasure** if they died in agony.'[33]

However, ἡμεῖς is also compatible with states of affairs that are clearly anchored in the speaker's actual reality:

(12) καὶ μὴν δι᾽ ὄρθρων γ᾽ οὔποτ᾽ ἐξελίμπανον / θρυλοῦσ᾽ ἅ γ᾽ εἰπεῖν ἤθελον κατ᾽ ὄμμα σόν, / εἰ δὴ γενοίμην δειμάτων ἐλευθέρα / τῶν πρόσθε. **νῦν** οὖν **ἔσμεν**... (E. *El.* 909–912) '... And yet I never ceased, throughout the early mornings, repeating what I wished to say to your face, if ever I were free from my old terrors. And **now I am**.' (Electra to Aegisthus' corpse)

(13) παριέμεσθα καὶ **φαμεν** κακῶς φρονεῖν / τότ᾽, ἀλλ᾽ ἄμεινον νῦν βεβούλευμαι τάδε (E. *Med.* 893–894) 'I give in: **I admit** that I was foolish then, but now I have taken a better view of the matter.' (Medea to Jason)

ἡμεῖς forms do refer to the speaker, as the opposition between ἡμεῖς and σύ is visible in some passages:

(14) πρός νύν σε κρηνῶν, πρὸς θεῶν ὁμογνίων / αἰτῶ πιθέσθαι καὶ παρεικαθεῖν, ἐπεὶ / **πτωχοὶ** μὲν **ἡμεῖς** καὶ **ξένοι**, ξένος δὲ **σύ**· / ἄλλους δὲ θωπεύοντες οἰκοῦμεν σύ τε / κἀγώ, τὸν αὐτὸν δαίμον᾽ ἐξειληχότες (S. *OC* 1333–1337) 'Then, by the streams of water and gods of our race, I ask you to listen and to yield. **I am** a beggar and a stranger, as **you are** yourself; by paying court to others both you and I have a home, obtaining by lot the same fortune.'

If ἡμεῖς refers – as the findings show – to a single speaker as a result of a change rather than the loss of its referential and deictic values, we should then determine which factor triggers the frequent occurrence of ἡμεῖς in the description of non-actual states of affairs. In my opinion, the key is the deactualising[34] effect of a plural form that associates *I* with someone else, but only metaphorically: the speaker associates himself/herself with a person or group that cannot be identified by the addressee either deictically or anaphorically.[35]

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33 Loeb translation slightly modified.

34 On the concept of *deactualisation*, see Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2004: p. 42), among others. Deactualisers blur the concrete references to the speaker's present and to his/her discourse world. They mainly impact on the expressions of person, time, and mood.

35 In its non-metaphorical uses, *we* refers to a group of individuals that have already been introduced in the discourse (cf. Helmbrecht 2002: pp. 31–32).

As ἡμεῖς developed into an expression of ἐγώ, the exclusive association (1 + 3) became a metaphorical association that lessened the definiteness of ἡμεῖς.[36] This reduction in definiteness made ἡμεῖς in the noun phrase layer akin to non-actual expressions in the clause layer: the person or group associated with the speaker, as well as the event referred to in the clause, had no location in the discourse world. Gradually, ἡμεῖς became a person-deactualising device, not with respect to the speaker's identity, as first-person forms normally function as expressions in which the speaker is the focal referent,[37] but to the person or group associated with the speaker.

As a person-deactualiser, it is not surprising that ἡμεῖς should co-occur with temporal and modal deactualisers in a sentence. The co-occurrence of ἡμεῖς and masculine forms in the dialogue of female characters that are referring to themselves also reflects, in my opinion, a tendency to combine deactualisers. We should bear in mind that in these contexts the masculine is used generically:[38]

(15) **ἡμεῖς** κτενοῦμεν **οἵπερ** ἐξεφύσαμεν (E. *Med*. 1241) 'I who gave them birth shall kill them.' (Medea to the chorus)

Avoidance of *I* generally results in different pragmatic meanings. Specifically, the use of *we* instead of *I* is, in many languages, a strategy used by the speaker to gain respect and, in some cases, to stress his/her social position.[39] In my view, this is also the case with ἡμεῖς in the contexts analysed: the speaker reinforces his/her dignity through metaphorical association with a group that does not include the addressee. It is precisely this group that reinforces the speaker's *I*.

2.4 Self-dignity and deference

Self-dignity is a dimension of deference.[40] In pragmatics, deference is defined as the expression of respect and social distance. Deference comes into play in situations in which one of the participants in the communicative exchange is assumed to be of superior status. However, it is also crucial in situations in which speakers, regardless of whether their status is unequal, treat each other with distance.[41] Deference may thus be symmetrical or asymmetrical and is closely linked to identities that are negotiated and created by speakers in specific social situations.

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36   Identifiability, familiarity, and accessibility are guiding criteria when explaining definiteness.

37   See Daniel (2005: pp. 13, 18).

38   Cf. also *Alc*. 382–383, *El*. 1010 and *Med*. 313–315.

39   See Brown & Levinson (1987: p. 200). Siewierska (2004: p. 217) suggests that plurality is cognitively associated with social power.

40   See Ide (2005).

41   On how interactional factors affect the functioning of deference, see Haugh (2010: pp. 278–281).

Deference is not equivalent to politeness, as it is not a strategy used to avoid conflict or promote collaboration, but rather to maintain relative social positions. Deference and politeness often overlap, but the former may also function as a sign of impoliteness.[42]

In the material selected, ἡμεῖς emerges as a device used by the speaker to demand or attribute dignity to himself/herself in situations where said speaker, who may have either a symmetrical or asymmetrical relationship with the addressee, considers it convenient or necessary. Therefore, ἡμεῖς can be analysed as *pluralis maiestatis*, or the royal we.

In the following passage, for example, Clytemnestra tries to justify her harsh behaviour to Electra. She uses ἡμᾶς when she refers to herself as the daughter of the famous king Tyndareus, given as wife to Agamemnon. When she refers to herself as a mother, however, she uses singular forms which stress her individuality, and possibly her feelings of aloneness:

(16) **ἡμᾶς** δ' ἔδωκε Τυνδάρεως τῷ σῷ πατρὶ / οὐχ ὥστε θνήσκειν οὐδ' ἃ **γειναίμην ἐγώ** (E. *El*. 1018–1019) 'Now Tyndareus gave **us** to your father not so that **I** or any children **I might bear** should die.'[43]

The use of ἡμεῖς in terms of a politeness/impoliteness strategy seems to be closely related to interactional factors, more concretely to the interest or disinterest of the speaker in maintaining a harmonious relationship with his/her addressee (cf. § 2.1). Thus, rapport maintenance leads to the use of ἡμεῖς as a strategy of negative politeness (cf. 15) while, on the contrary, rapport neglect can lead in some contexts to its use as an impoliteness strategy. In the following passage, for example, Creon uses ἐμοί to refer to himself as a person in a position of defencelessness, but he switches to ἡμεῖς when he wants to refer to himself as a king exercising his power. Here, ἡμεῖς possibly reflects Creon's desire to intimidate Theseus, his addressee:

(17) οὐδὲν σὺ μεμπτὸν ἐνθάδ' ὢν ἐρεῖς **ἐμοί**· / οἴκοι δὲ **χἠμεῖς εἰσόμεσθ'** ἃ χρὴ ποεῖν (S. *OC* 1036–1037) 'Say to me what you wish while you are here; I will not object. But at home **we** too **will know** how to act.'[44]

Conclusions

This study leads to the following conclusions:

1. In its use in reference to one speaker, ἡμεῖς generally draws on its exclusive value. ἡμεῖς is observed in characters of a high social rank when interacting with each other or, less frequently, with characters from humbler backgrounds. The emergence of ἡμεῖς is clearly linked to the use of speaker-oriented speech acts. Contrary to the claim of some scholars, ἡμεῖς is not particularly connected with female speech.

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42   Cysouw (2005: pp. 221–222).

43   Loeb translation, modified.

44   Loeb translation, modified.

2. In all of the contexts analysed, the real or metaphorical association between the speaker and one or more associates – often unknown for the addressee - has gradually lessened the definiteness of ἡμεῖς. This was likely a key factor in the development of the deactualising function of ἡμεῖς. As a person-deactualiser, ἡμεῖς tends to co-occur with other deactualising devices, such as masculine forms used when referring to a female speaker.

3. A metaphorical association with a person or group which reinforces the speaker's *I* has allowed ἡμεῖς to develop a pragmatic meaning of self-dignity. Self-dignity reflects the speaker's desire to maintain or gain distance from the addressee. The expression of self-dignity does not necessarily reflect polite behaviour.

4. The functioning of ἡμεῖς can be construed as the so-called *pluralis maiestatis*. It is therefore not the result of a late evolution of ἡμεῖς, as some scholars have considered it to be, but a phenomenon that had already taken shape in the Classical Period.

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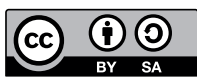
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ČLÁNKY / ARTICLES

Luz Conti / luz.conti@uam.es

Department of Classical Philology

Autonomous University of Madrid, Faculty of Philosophy and Liberal Arts

Ciudad Universitaria de Cantoblanco, Calle Francisco Tomás y Valiente, 1, 28049 Madrid, Spain