

Referential *you* vs. impersonal *you**

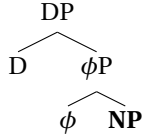
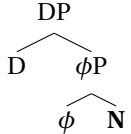
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1 Introduction

- In this study, we examine the properties of the pronoun *you* and focus on two types of readings:
 - a REFERENTIAL READING, in which *you* refers to a specific individual or plurality of individuals who are the speaker’s interlocutor (or addressee):
 - (1) *You* did very well on your exam.
 - an IMPERSONAL READING, in which *you* refers to people in general:
 - (2) a. As a human being, *you* suffer when you see others suffer.
 - b. When/if *you* go to Brazil, you eat excellent meat.
 - c. *You* should take care of your health.
- In the pragmatics literature, *you* is typically viewed as the same pronoun - its different interpretations depend on the context (Gast et al. 2015). Is this accurate? Is it really the case that there are no syntactic differences between the two pronouns?
- Employing a battery of tests, we argue that these two readings correspond to two minimally distinct internal structures for referential *you* and impersonal *you*.

Table 1: Properties of *you*

	Referential <i>you</i>	Impersonal <i>you</i>
Structure		
Person	2nd	2nd
Number	SG or PL	only SG
Case	Occurs in multiple case positions	Occurs in multiple case positions

*We are very grateful to the students in our seminar on Impersonal Constructions (held at Yale in Fall 2021) for wonderful discussions and insights, especially Catarina Soares, Ka Fai Yip, Comfort Ahenkorah, Lydia Lee and Andreea Ciobanu. We would also like to thank the members of the Yale Syntax Reading Group, especially Jim Wood and Veneeta Dayal, and the members of the Princeton LIN Lunch group for their feedback, especially Laura Kalin, Byron Ahn, and Jack Merrill.

- Our study also contributes to the larger typological picture of impersonal pronouns. Previous literature (e.g., Egerland 2003; Sigurðsson and Egerland 2009; Ackema and Neeleman 2018; Fenger 2018) has argued that they exhibit a deficient structure, for example:
 - lacking a DP
 - lacking a Φ P layer

We demonstrate that impersonal pronouns like English *you* can have both of these layers.

Table 2: Three types of impersonal pronouns

Impersonal <i>you</i>	Icelandic <i>maður</i>	Dutch <i>men</i>
DP / \ D ϕ P / \ ϕ N	ϕ P / \ ϕ N	N

- **Road map:**

- Section 2: Distinguishing the two readings
- Section 3: Syntactic properties of referential and impersonal *you*
- Section 4: Syntactic analysis
- Section 5: Typology of impersonal pronouns
- Section 6: Summary and open questions

2 Distinguishing the two readings

- The impersonal reading of *you* arises in generic statements. Such statements are about the state of affairs that holds true in general (and not about specific events).
 - (3) a. To age well, *you* should exercise and remain flexible.
 - b. *You* don't need to be rich in order to be happy.
 - c. *You* shouldn't drink and drive. (Gast et al. 2015)
- Impersonal *you* can be replaced by the English impersonal *one*.¹
 - (4) a. To age well, *one* should exercise and remain flexible.
 - b. *One* don't/doesn't need to be rich in order to be happy.
 - c. *One* shouldn't drink and drive.
- The impersonal reading of *you* is incompatible with episodic statements, which hold true at a particular moment of time.
 - (5) a. Yesterday *you* looked tired. (referential ✓, impersonal *)
 - b. *You* will meet my mother this evening. (referential ✓, impersonal *)

¹However, the two are not always interchangeable (Kirkpatrick et al. 2020):

- (i) You have a nose.
- (ii) ??One has a nose.

- Contexts that do not allow impersonal *you* do not allow impersonal *one*, either:

- (6) a. *Yesterday *one* looked tired.
 b. **One* will meet my mother this evening.

Genericity is supported by a number of properties of a sentence, which include imperfective aspect, the presence of a modal and of certain restrictors, such as prepositional phrases, *as*-phrases, *when* and *if*-clauses:

- (7) a. *You* suffer when *you* see others suffer. (imperfective aspect)
 b. *You* should take care of your health. (modal)
 c. From the top of East Rock, *you* get a nice view of New Haven. (prepositional phrase)
 d. As a human being, *you* suffer when you see others suffer. (*as*-phrase)
 e. If *you* go to Italy, *you* eat delicious food. (*if*-clause)

3 Syntactic properties of referential and impersonal *you*

In this section,

- we bring together a number of observations, some novel and some from the literature;
- we provide a comprehensive syntactic comparison of the two pronouns – which has not been done before;
- we show that, despite some similarities, the two are syntactically distinct.

3.1 Observations concerning number

Referential *you* can be either singular or plural; **impersonal *you*** syntactically behaves like a **singular** pronoun.

3.1.1 Binding

- Referential *you* can bind both singular and plural anaphors as illustrated in (8). Thus, at least syntactically, referential *you* can function either as a singular pronoun or as a plural pronoun.

- (8) Did *you_i* see *yourselves_i/yourself_i* in the mirror?

- However, as noted by Kitagawa and Lehrer 1990, impersonal *you* can only bind a singular anaphor. We take this to suggest that the impersonal *you* syntactically behaves like a singular pronoun.

- (9) a. To survive in this world, *you_i* have to believe in *yourself_i*. (referential ✓, impersonal ✓)
 b. To survive in this world, *you_i* have to believe in *yourselves_i*. (referential ✓, impersonal *)

3.1.2 Nominal predicates

- Referential *you* is compatible with both singular and plural nominal predicates.

- (10) Yesterday we won because *you* were an excellent captain/excellent co-captains.

- Impersonal *you* is only compatible with a nominal predicate that is singular (Malamud 2012).

- (11) a. *You* could be *a crook* and still win elections. (referential ✓, impersonal ✓)
 b. *You* could be *crooks* and still win elections. (referential ✓, impersonal *)

3.1.3 Numeral modifiers

- If the impersonal *you* is indeed singular, then we would not expect it to be compatible with numerals or quantifiers that mark plurality. This prediction is borne out. In the following instances, *you* can only have a referential use.

(12) *You two* suffer when you see others suffer. (referential ✓, impersonal*)

(13) *You both* suffer when you see others suffer. (referential ✓, impersonal*)

These examples might also be ungrammatical because impersonal *you* cannot be modified in general.

3.1.4 As-phrases

- The *as*-phrase restricts the interpretation of impersonal and referential *you*.
- Referential *you* allows both singular and plural *as*-phrases.
- In contrast, impersonal *you* allows only a singular *as*-phrase.²

(14) a. As a human being, *you* suffer when you see others suffer. (referential ✓, impersonal ✓)

b. As human beings, *you* suffer when you see others suffer. (referential ✓, impersonal*)

(15) a. As a responsible member of society, *you* shouldn't drink and drive. (referential ✓, impersonal ✓)

b. As responsible members of society, *you* shouldn't drink and drive. (referential ✓, impersonal*)

3.2 Coordination

- Referential *you* can be coordinated with other pronouns as well as with lexical DPs as illustrated in (16).

(16) a. *You* and I have different opinions on this. (referential ✓, impersonal *)

b. *You* and Sue's brothers would get along well. (referential ✓, impersonal *)

- Impersonal *you* cannot occur in most types of coordination (cf. brief mention in Whitley (1978:25)).
- However, it can be coordinated when the second conjunct contains an instance of *your* (see also Bolinger (1979:196)):

(17) a. In general, *you* and *your kids* should exercise on a regular basis.

b. In general, *you* and *your partner* should have common interests.

c. It's helpful for *you* and *your doctor* to have the same general approach to medical care.

- The question is why impersonal *you* is restricted in this way.
 - Law of the Coordination of Likes (Williams 1978, originally based on Chomsky's work (1957:36): only conjuncts of the same syntactic category can be coordinated

(18) the scene [_{PP} of the movie] and [_{PP} of the play]

(19) *the scene [_{PP} of the movie] and [_{CP} that I wrote]

- Schachter 1977: two phrases can be coordinated if they belong to the same syntactic category *and* perform the same semantic function (see also Munn 1993; Johannessen 1998; Larson 1990, among others).

²Our consultants report that the examples in (14b-15b) are felicitous if they are uttered by a speaker in a class auditorium where the speaker is aware of their addressees. This falls outside the use of the impersonal pronoun *you*. Furthermore, the *as*-phrase may also include a collective noun like *group* as in (i), but in those cases *you* refers to a certain group of individuals, which looks like an instance of the vague *you* reading.

(i) As a group of responsible people, you suffer when you see others suffer. (Jim Wood pc.)

- It is ungrammatical to coordinate a generic predicate with an episodic one (Zhang 2009:188):

(20) *Dogs are mammals and are barking right now in front of my window.

- The reason why the impersonal *you* is restricted in coordination contexts is because it requires a semantically compatible conjunct and also a phrase that is of the same syntactic category. These two constraints are satisfied by phrases like *your parents, your children, your doctor*:

- (21) a. In general, [DP *you*] and [DP *your kids*] should exercise on a regular basis.
 b. In general, [DP *you*] and [DP *your partner*] should have common interests.
 c. It's helpful for [DP *you*] and [DP *your doctor*] to have the same general approach to medical care.

- We take (21) to show us that:
 - impersonal *you* is a DP because it can be coordinated with other DPs
 - *you* and *your kids* are semantically alike.

3.3 Appositives

- Another syntactic environment that has been analyzed as a type of coordination is appositives (for discussion see De Vries 2006, 2008).
- Only referential *you* can be modified by an appositive.
- Three types of appositives are possible with referential *you*: identificational appositives (22a), attributinal appositives (22b), and inclusion appositives relation in (22c), based on Heringa (2012):

- (22) a. *You, Laura Anderson, are a member of the student council.* ‘Identificational apposition’
 b. *You, my neighbour, always act so kindly.* ‘Attributinal apposition’
 c. *You students, graduate students in particular, need to apply for funding.* ‘Inclusion apposition’

- Generic statements are compatible with appositives:

- (23) a. *People, human beings, are easily moved by tragedies.*
 b. *People, hard working creatures, need a lot of sleep.*
 c. *People, but children in particular, need a lot of sleep.*

- In contrast, appositives are not compatible with impersonal *you*:

- (24) a. *You, a human being, are easily moved by tragedies.* (referential: ✓, impersonal: *)
 b. *You, a hard working creature, need a lot of sleep.* (referential: ✓, impersonal: *)

Note that impersonal *one* is also incompatible with an appositive:

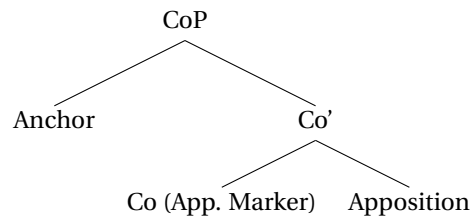
- (25) a. **One, a human being, is easily moved by tragedies.*
 b. **One, a hard working creature, needs a lot of sleep.*

However, appositives become much better when they contain a second mention of *you*, which is consistent with what we have seen above with coordination.

- (26) a. *You, especially your children, should think about the environment.*
 b. *One, especially one's sense of safety, can be shaken up by images of war.*
 c. *You, especially your immune system, need Vitamin C.*

- Some analyses of appositional constructions involve a relation of coordination between the anchor (the DP being modified) and the apposition (the string that modifies the anchor); see Heringa 2012b:555 for references).

(27)



- If coordination with impersonal pronouns is restricted, and appositives are a type of coordination, this could be the reason why they are restricted with impersonal pronouns.

3.4 Case

- Referential *you* may occur in multiple case positions (e.g., as a subject, a direct object, or an indirect object). This is not surprising.
- What is noteworthy is that impersonal *you* can occur in multiple case positions also (Soares 2021).³

1. Object (direct and indirect)

(28) People hug *you* on your birthday. (Soares 2021) (referential ✓, impersonal ✓)

(29) a. Sometimes people give *you* the best present without even realizing it.
 b. Some companies send *you* packages (and you don't know what to do with them).
 (referential ✓, impersonal ✓)

(30) Your business can't reach, much less bond with, a customer who doesn't give attention to *you*.

2. ECM

(31) a. The government wants *you* to comply. (Soares 2021) (referential ✓, impersonal ✓)

b. Your mentors want *you* to succeed (referential ✓, impersonal ✓)

3. Passives

(32) a. In this country, *you* could be arrested for anything. (referential ✓, impersonal ✓)

b. Before giving evidence in court *you* will be asked if you wish to take an oath or make an affirmation that your evidence is true.

3.5 NP complements

- Referential *you* can take a full noun phrase complement;⁴
- impersonal *you* cannot.

(33) a. *You* should take care of your health. (referential: ✓, impersonal: ✓)

b. *You people* should take care of your health. (referential: ✓, impersonal: *)

(34) a. *You* must accept what life has in store for you. (referential: ✓, impersonal: ✓)

b. *You Susan* must accept what life has in store for you. (referential: ✓, impersonal: *)

This leads us to suggest that the internal structure of referential *you* contains an NP, but the internal structure of impersonal *you* does not.

³This is surprising because impersonal pronouns in many languages are restricted to subject position (e.g., Dutch *men* and Swedish *man* (Fenger 2018) and Italian *-si-*, Cinque 1988; Chierchia 1995). It is important to note that the pronouns that have a restricted distribution allow both a generic and an arbitrary reading (Egerland 2003:80–81) whereas impersonal *you* disallows an arbitrary reading.

⁴Postal (1969) provides evidence against viewing these noun phrases as a pronoun modified by an appositive. He argues instead that they consist of a D followed by a noun phrase.

3.6 Stress

- Referential *you* can be stressed, whereas impersonal *you* cannot:

(35) YOU always behave professionally, THEY do not. (referential✓, impersonal*)

(36) a. You should always be kind. (referential✓, impersonal✓)

b. YOU should always be kind. (referential✓, impersonal*)

- Note that it is possible to have impersonal *you* as part of a contrast, if the contrast is provided by the restrictor:

(37) As an older adult, you need about 7 hours of sleep per night; as a teenager, you need at least 8.
(referential✓, impersonal ✓)

- However, impersonal *you* itself cannot bear stress:

(38) As an older adult, YOU need about 7 hours of sleep per night; as a teenager, YOU need at least 8.
(referential✓, impersonal*)

- The moment *you* is stressed, the impersonal reading disappears and only the referential one is available.

3.7 Section Summary

- Below is a summary of the differences and similarities between referential *you* and impersonal *you*.

	Referential you	Impersonal you
can be singular and plural	✓	✓ (restricted)
can be coordinated	✓	✓ (restricted)
can be modified by an appositive	✓	✓ (restricted)
can occur in multiple case positions	✓	✓
can take an NP complement	✓	*
can be stressed	✓	*

4 Syntactic analysis

- We argue that referential *you* and impersonal *you* have (slightly) different syntactic structures.
- Building on the rich literature on pronouns Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002; Egerland 2003; Fenger 2018; Hall 2019, we propose that referential *you* and impersonal *you* have an internal structure that is partly similar and partly different.

Table 3: Properties of *you*

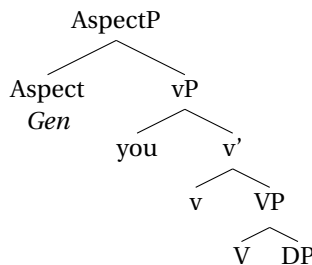
	Referential <i>you</i>	Impersonal <i>you</i>
Structure		
Person	2nd person feature	2nd person feature
Number	SG or PL	only SG
Case	Occurs in multiple case positions	Occurs in multiple case positions

4.1 Genericity

Impersonal *you* is possible in generic contexts.

- We assume that the generic operator is located in a structural position higher than the layer where both external and internal arguments are introduced.
- For the sake of concreteness, we adopt the proposal made by D’Alessandro and Alexiadou (2002) that places it in the Aspect phrase above vP with its arguments.

(39) Impersonal *you*:



4.2 Person and Number

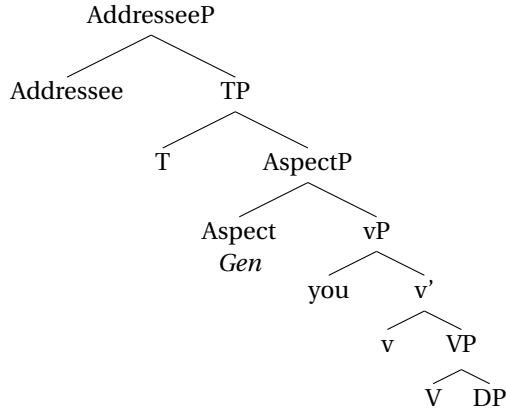
- Both pronouns have the same morphological form.
- This is not an accident: both have the same person feature, i.e. 2nd person
- How do they come to have their 2nd person feature?
- There are two lines of work:
 1. Person as a feature in the lexical entry e.g., Harley and Ritter (2002), Sigurðsson and Egerland (2009)
 2. Person as a feature inherited through binding by an operator e.g., Tsoulas and Kural (1999); Speas and Tenny (2003); Sigurðsson (2004); Bianchi (2006); Baker (2008); Kratzer (2009).
- For example, Baker (2008) proposes that 1st and 2nd person pronouns are bound by a Speaker or an Addressee operator, respectively.

The Person Licensing Condition (PLC) (Baker 2008:126):

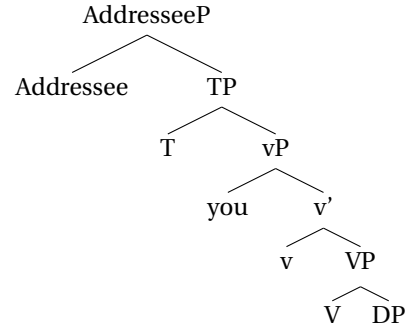
- a. A DP/NP is first person only if it is locally bound by the closest c-commanding S (Speaker) or by another element that is first person.
- b. A DP/NP is second position only if it is locally bound by the closest c-commanding A (Addressee) or by another element that is itself second person.
- c. Otherwise, a DP/NP is third person.

- Here we follow Baker’s proposal and assume that both referential and impersonal *you* get their value for person from an Addressee operator.⁵

(40) Impersonal *you*:

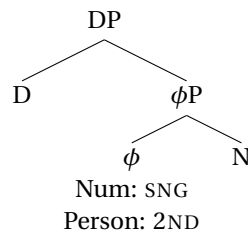


(41) Referential *you*:



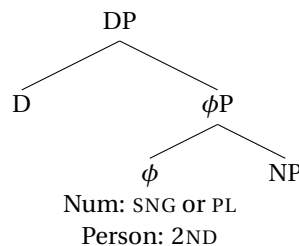
- The number feature of impersonal *you* is syntactically singular. We take this feature to be inherently specified. The pronoun enters the derivation with its value for number set.

(42) Impersonal *you*



- In contrast, the number feature of referential *you* can syntactically be either plural or singular.

(43) Referential *you*



⁵The question might arise of whether the speaker’s addressee is always included in the set of individuals that is the domain of impersonal *you*. Under our current analysis, it does: the addressee is invited to self-ascribe properties that they do not have. These are the so-called ‘simulation contexts’ (Gast et al. 2015 and Deringer et al. (2015)). If (i) is uttered to an addressee who is not a cancer survivor, the literature expresses the intuition that the addressee is asked to imagine that they have that property (being a cancer survivor).

(i) As a cancer survivor, *you* have a heightened appreciation of life.

4.3 D layer

- Surprisingly, we are going to argue that the D-layer is present in the structure of both referential and impersonal *you*. Why?
 - Coordination. Recall that, while impersonal *you* cannot be coordinated with just any DP (44), it can be coordinated with some DPs (45):

(44) a. [_{DP} *You*] and [_{DP} I] have different opinions on this. (referential ✓, impersonal *)

b. [_{DP} *You*] and [_{DP} Sue's brothers] would get along well. (referential ✓, impersonal *)

(45) It's helpful for [_{DP} *you*] and [_{DP} *your doctor*] to have the same general approach to medical care.
 - Appositives. We see a pattern similar to the one we saw in cases of coordination: not all appositives are possible with impersonal *you*, but some are:

(46) a. [_{DP} *You*], [_{DP} especially *your* immune system], need Vitamin C.

b. [_{DP} *You*], [_{DP} especially *your* children], should think about the environment.

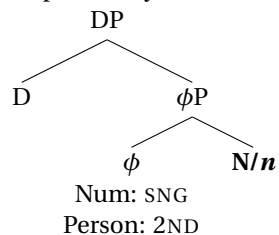
4.4 Case

- Assuming that both referential and impersonal *you* are DPs leads us to expect that both should be able to bear case.
- This is correct: both pronouns occur in multiple case positions, as we saw in (35)-(39) above.

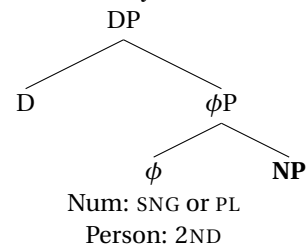
4.5 NP vs. N

- The surprising difference between the two pronouns is that referential *you* allows an NP complement whereas impersonal *you* does not.
- This leads us to propose the following:
 - In the case of referential *you*, the head of ϕ P merges with an NP.
 - In contrast, in the case of impersonal *you*, the head of ϕ P merges with an N head. The two heads may be combined via adjunction (Pair Merge, Chomsky 2004).

(47) Impersonal *you*



(48) Referential *you*



The literature has claimed for a number of languages that impersonal pronouns are deficient and simply consist of a head N that carries a [+ human] feature (Egerland 2003).

- Does impersonal *you* have a [+ human] feature? If so, is it a feature of N or does it come with 2nd person 'for free'?⁶

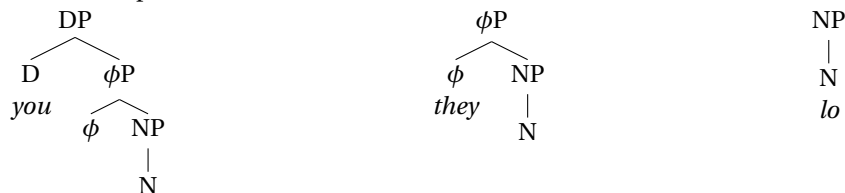
⁶Impersonal *you* is compatible with a non-human interpretation in *if*-clauses:

- If *you* are a mammal, no matter if *you* are a human, mouse, tiger, or whale, *you* have seven vertebrae in your neck. (internet example)
- Moreover, if *you* are a mammal, then *you* are an animal.
- If *you're* in SpecCP, then *you're* ... crashing the whole derivation. (Malamud 2012:22)

5 Typology of impersonal pronouns

- Different types of structures have been proposed for pronouns across languages
- Referential pronouns range from a full DP to NP

(49) Referential pronouns (Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002)



- Impersonal pronouns might be thought to be reduced, by comparison to referential pronouns.
- However, they also show the full range of possible structures, typologically:
 - some are analyzed as having a full DP: the impersonal pronoun *waħaad* in Jordanian Arabic (Alhailawani et al. 2022), German *du* and English *you* (Ritter and Wiltschko 2019), impersonal *man* in Multicultural London English (Hall 2020)
 - others are analyzed as being a ϕ P: Frisian *men* and Icelandic *maður* (Fenger 2018)
 - others as an N: *men* in Dutch (Ackema and Neeleman 2018; Fenger 2018; Hall 2019), *ma* in Austrian (Ritter and Wiltschko 2019), *si* in Italian (Egerland 2003)
- We contribute to this body of literature by showing that impersonal *you* is defective, but at the bottom, rather than at the top: it has a DP layer but lacks an NP complement.

Table 4: Three types of impersonal pronouns

Impersonal <i>you</i>	Icelandic <i>maður</i>	Dutch <i>men</i>
DP	ϕ P	N

6 Summary and Open Questions

- We have provided a detailed comparison of referential and impersonal *you*, focusing on their syntactic properties. We have sketched an analysis that aims to capture both their similarities and their differences.
- **Open question 1: Coordination** What is the nature of the constraint that we observed in Section 3.2? Why is coordination possible only when the second conjunct is *your children* or *your parents*?
- **Open question 2: Appositives** We pointed out appositives exhibit a similar restriction: impersonal *you* can only be modified by an appositive that contains *your*. What is behind this restriction?

- **Open question 3: Reciprocals** Impersonal *you* can bind the reciprocal *each other*, as pointed out by Malamud (2012:10) and shown in her example in (50)⁷. How do we reconcile this with the evidence that suggests that impersonal *you* is singular?

(50) In those days, *you_i* couldn't talk to *each other_i* in the street.

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⁷Note that the reciprocal *each other* could also be licensed by the verbal agreement that is plural. Typically, the generic singular DPs which are conceptually plural do not license *each other* (Veneeta Dayal pc.).

- (i) The lion gathers under acacia trees.
- (ii) *The lion doesn't attack each other.

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