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## **The Case of the Unmarked Pronoun**

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This paper is about late Modern English, especially the language of the turn of the century.<sup>1</sup> I start with some more longterm context. Case differentiation in personal pronouns has diminished over the years. In Old English, there were up to four distinct caseforms:

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1. The material here expands on a section of Denison (in press), which was commented on by Dick Hudson and Rodney Huddleston. I am grateful also to the audience at Edinburgh and at the Philological Society in London for helpful comments, and especially to Derek Britton for his careful editorial follow-up. Thanks too to Woolf and Dinah Price for help with finding examples.

## (1) OE singular and plural personal pronouns

<i>nominative</i>	ic	þu	he	heo	hit	we	ge	hie
<i>accusative</i>	me(c)	þe(c)	hine	hie	hit	us(ic)	eow(ic)	hie
<i>dative</i>	me	þe	him	hire	him	us	eow	him
<i>genitive</i>	min	þin	his	hire	his	ure	eower	hira

I have omitted the dual forms, and also, of course, numerous dialect and spelling variants. There are some individual replacements during the Middle English period, but the important point is the change in *system*, in the number of contrasts. (The details of change vary greatly among ME dialects, of course.) By the time the ME period is over, the paradigm looks like this:

## (2) eModE singular and plural personal pronouns

<i>subjective</i>	I	thou	he	she	it	we	ye	they
<i>objective</i>	me	thee	him	her	it	us	you	them
<i>genitive</i>	mine	thine	his	her	his/it	our	your	their

As we move through early Modern English there is very little change in the standard language: the development of *its*, the separation of determiner genitive *my* from disjunctive genitive *mine*, the syncretism of *ye* and *you*, and the loss of the *thou* paradigm. In the late Modern English period, then, the system has stabilised as follows in standard:

## (3) IModE singular and plural personal pronouns

<i>subjective</i>	I	he	she	it	we	you	they
<i>objective</i>	me	him	her	it	us	you	them
<i>genitive</i>	my	his	her	its	our	your	their

In detail there has been hardly any change for 300-400 years, in system for maybe 700-800 years. That's from the point of view of the *forms*. But in late ModE



much to say on these topics. The fullest discussion is in Dekeyser (1975), who gives a comprehensive analysis of a large nineteenth-century corpus of texts and grammars.

Something I want to explore now is variation according to *person*. Dekeyser (1975: 205-8) quotes grammarians of the mid-nineteenth century who compare *it is me* and *it is him*. Latham and others sanction the former but stigmatise the latter, while Alford argues that “if we are prepared to defend the one, we ought in consistency also to defend the other”. Both judgements imply, I think, that *me* and *him* were differently perceived at that time. (For me, now, there is no distinction by *person*, only by *register*.) Unfortunately, Dekeyser does not discriminate between them in his statistics on actual usage, but it *is* very hard to find sufficient examples to make the distinction – especially if, like me, you want them in a single idiolect relatively free of prescriptive influence.

There is some evidence for a different environment in a grammar not used by Dekeyser. In 1894 (repeated as late as ca 1940), Jespersen traced 1 SG *Not me!* back to 1848 Dickens (it may well be older still), but claimed that 3 SG *Not him!* was absent even from vulgar speech (Jespersen 1894: 251; Jespersen 1909: VII 264). In corroboration of the claim that the third person subjective was much more resilient than the first, note:

(8) a. Not *they*, Mr Jonas!

(1871-2 Eliot, *Middlemarch* lxxi)

b. “‘E ain’t forgot you, not ‘e,” said Dickie;

(1909 Nesbit, *Harding’s Luck* viii)

The speaker of (8)a is a minor character, Mrs Dollop, the pub landlady, whose speech is otherwise comically nonstandard; the speaker in (8)b has no fewer than four signs of Cockney usage in this six-word speech. *Not him/her/them* is widespread now – indeed normal in educated speech – but it appears to be a

twentieth-century innovation. (Quirk et al. 1985: §6.4 are not explicit on person-case interaction.)<sup>2</sup>

Here is some evidence from some children's stories by Edith Nesbit (born 1858), written around the first decade of this century and typically involving a group of upper-middle-class brothers and sisters. The figures are given in Table 1 below. Now Nesbit's other linguistic characterisation tends to rather cheap stereotyping, social and linguistic – comic Cockney servants, charmingly incompetent Frenchwomen, grasping Jewish shopkeepers, etc. – but I have confidence in her children as speaking as naturally as could be hoped for in written dialogue. She was perfectly aware of the disjunction between her characters' dialogue and prescriptive norms, as numerous asides in the novels testify:

(9) 'But I didn't agree to your being *me*.'

'That's poetry, even if it isn't grammar,' said the thing that looked like Maurice.

(1912 Nesbit, *Magic World* i)

(It is noteworthy that ungrammatical little Maurice in (9) quite naturally uses genitive for the subject of a gerund.)

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2. For the sake of completeness, we should note that certain PDE dialects practise so-called PRO exchange, using historical subjective pronouns like *they* as emphatic forms in all syntactic functions, and historical objective cases like *them* as unemphatic forms. It is conceivable, as Derek Britton pointed out (p.c., 15 Jun 95), that an example like (8)a could be explained on this basis.

Table 1: *Some pronouns in works of E. Nesbit*<sup>3</sup>

	X is PRO	it is PRO + relative	PRO	not PRO, nor yet PRO	as/than PRO
I	4 <sup>4</sup>	1 <sup>5</sup>	2 <sup>6</sup>	4 <sup>7</sup>	1 <sup>8</sup>
me	17	6	17	21	3
we	0	0	0	0	0
us	8	9	3	5	2
you	19	11	6	3	2
he	0	1	0	2 <sup>9</sup>	1
him	3	1	3	1	1
she	0	0	0	1	0
her	1	0	1	0	0
it	11	0	0	9	0
they	0	0	0	1	0
them	5	1	0	0	0

3. The books used are listed at the end. I have counted instances in dialogue, plus some narration in character which seems to be equivalent to monologue, but no authorial narrative.

4. The *it is I* forms are from an adult (×1) and an adult-like cat (×1), and in an imagined scene from a melodrama (×2).

5. The *it is I + REL* example is from an adult.

6. Both occurrences of disjunctive *I* are from adults.

7. The *not I/nor I* examples are by the Psammead (a magical creature from ancient times), a prince, and a boy leader newly promoted to 'Lord Vice-Noah'!

8. The one occurrence of *as/than I* is in the mouth of Anne Boleyn.

9. One occurrence of *not he* is a child speaking rural dialect (*not 'e*), the only occurrence of *not him* is an adult dialect speaker (*not 'im*).

For subject predicative, A, Nesbit postdates the real change; objective case is normal throughout in the speech of children:

- (10) a. 'It's only *me*,' said Jimmy.  
(1907 Nesbit, *Enchanted Castle* i)
- b. 'I beg your pardon, ...  
'It's *us* that beg yours,' said Cyril politely.  
(1906 Nesbit, *Amulet* iii)
- c. 'It's *them!*' cried Robert [original emphasis]  
(*ibid.* xiv)
- (11) 'Oh, if it's only *I*,' he said; [original emphasis]  
(1904 Nesbit, *Phoenix* x)

Note that the grammatically proper 1 SG subjective of (11) is spoken by an adult curate rather than by a child.

As for the B contrast between (12) and (13), here too I think Nesbit comes too late; the salient contrast appears to be between the writer's own voice and her fictional children, since the variation was a well-known marker of 'correctness':

- (12) a. The children were as white *as he*.  
(1906 Nesbit, *Amulet* v)
- b. But Martha was stronger *than he*.  
(1902 Nesbit, *5 Children* ix)
- (13) a. '... Just because he's bigger *than me*.'  
(*ibid.* viii)
- b. '... And Cyril is nearer to being a man *than us*, because he is the eldest.'  
(*ibid.* ii)
- c. 'I only wish I was bigger *than him*, that's all.'  
(*ibid.* viii)

The change was already complete in colloquial speech and was only held back by prescriptivism. When a century earlier the fictional Harriet Smith had said:

(14) for they are quite as educated *as me*

(1816 Austen, *Emma* iv)

she revealed her *lack* of education by Jane Austen's lights, a delicacy of characterisation which would not work now. Examples of 'incorrect' objective after *as/than* go back to around the time of Shakespeare, and the majority of Jespersen's are 1 SG (Jespersen 1909: VII 227-36).

As far as C, the *not PRO/nor yet PRO* pattern, is concerned, however, Nesbit shows Jespersen's difference between *me* and *him* very clearly, and without any self-consciousness:

(15) a. 'Not *me!*' was Gerald's unhesitating rejoinder.

(1907 Nesbit, *Enchanted Castle* i)

b. 'Not *us!*' said Mabel.

(*ibid.* xi)

(16) a. Mr Ji-jimmy's friend will have something worth having to put in his article now,' said Cyril very much later indeed.

'Not *he!*' said Robert sleepily.

(1906 Nesbit, *Amulet* ix)

b. 'Not *she,*' said the Psammead a little less crossly.

(*ibid.* viii)

c. 'Not *they,*' cried the Princess joyously.

(1907 Nesbit, *Enchanted Castle* i)

Note also (8)b, though that was put in the mouth of a child with a very deprived background, unlike the other Nesbit children quoted here. To anticipate an objection which was raised when I presented these examples before, the choice of case is not being determined by the case demanded by the syntax of the preceding context.

Why do the pronouns behave differentially? Jespersen's explanation was based on phonetic patterning: objective *me, thee* rhyme with subjective *he, she, we, ye* and so get used in traditionally subjective contexts where *him, her, us* would not be found (1894: §§193ff). In fact, though, he tends to contrast 1 SG with 3 SG only, perhaps because 1 SG is the most commonly found pronoun. Is the choice of case conditioned by phonetics or by person? Both explanations correctly predict that 3 PL will resist change, but the crucial test is 1 PL, which clearly prefer objective case in this environment despite the fact that it is subjective case which rhymes on [i:]. It is indeed person which matters.

So probably in at least two of our three contexts, first precedes third person in undergoing the change from subjective to objective. Unfortunately there is no case marking in the second person. However, the change in the subject predicative environment may be early enough to show up in dialects with the *thou/thee* distinction if not *ye/you*: in Visser's collection (1963: §266) plus a preliminary search of *OED*, 1 SG and 2 SG occur in the objective after a copula verb from about 1600, 1 PL is not attested until 1713, 3 SG occurs from about 1700 (3 PL once 1654-66, then 1850). The dates are messy and reflect all sorts of text. Abbott's *Shakespearian Grammar* (1883[1870]: §§205-16) has some intriguing examples of 'wrong' pronoun use:

- (17) a. Is she as tall as *me*?  
No mightier than thyself or *me*.
- b. Here's none but *thee and I*.  
All debts are cleared between *you and I*.  
You know my father has no child but *I*. [rhyme]
- c. I would not be *thee*, nuncle.  
I am not thee.
- d. Which of *he or Adrian ...* ?  
I would wish me only *he*.  
And yet no man like he doth grieve my heart.  
Yes, you have seen *Cassio and she* together.  
So saucy with the hand of *she here* – what's her name?
- e. Your safety, for the which *myself and them* bend their best studies.

This collection of examples incorrect by the standards of 1870 seems to show a tendency for first and second person to err on the side of the objective, third on the subjective. (I have omitted examples with a following relative clause.) I haven't yet found any author who has a large number of natural examples during the changeover periods of the other environments.

I suspect that if second person case had not been lost, first and second would have gone together in preceding third. Note that first and second person pronouns are primarily deictic, whereas the third person is primarily anaphoric (concerned with textual cohesion): their semantics and pragmatics are quite different. Note too how the morphological syncretism proceeded in earlier times: the paradigm in (1) shows that already by OE times, acc/dat distinction was obsolescent in first and second person but healthy in third, while (2) and (3) show how – in different ways – subjective/objective case distinction was lost in second; it may be that this morphological distinction only survived in first because those

paradigms were suppletive ones with two caseforms greatly different from each other.

Here is a still current kind of case variation. In many varieties, pronouns in coordinate NPs show a different range of case forms from that appropriate to non-coordinate NPs (and are a great bugbear of prescriptivists). Objective forms in subject position are common, if non-standard:

- (18)  $\left. \begin{array}{l} \textit{Him and me} \\ \textit{Me and him} \end{array} \right\} \text{B}$  went to town yesterday.

Conversely, and perhaps not with the same groups of speakers, subjective forms may occur in object positions:

- (19) a. It's difficult for *my wife and I* to find time.  
 b. between *you and I*

Conjuncts like *my wife and I*, *you and I* in examples like (19) are arguably widespread enough among educated speakers to be called standard (beside the 'correct' and historically expected *my wife and me*, *you and me*). Neither (18) or (19) is all that new. If, as seems plausible, (19) is a hypercorrect reaction to the stigmatised (18) – “Use forms *X and I*, because *X and me* is wrong” – its occurrence well before the heyday of published prescriptive grammar, e.g. occasionally in Shakespeare as in (17), is interesting, and suggests to me that a prescriptive tradition was incipient in education. (Incidentally, do you need prescription for hypercorrection?) And why should (18) be so common anyway?

Several accounts have been offered, e.g. Emonds (1986), who argues that the standard distribution is completely unnatural in a language that lacks morphological case-marking. Parker, Riley & Meyer (1988) attempt another GB account in which the ordinary rules of case assignment are blocked in coordination structures, allowing for free choice of case. (They even try to use

that for the hypercorrections like (19)!) But Shorrocks (1992) showed that coordination was not the crucial factor, a point I had independently reached without then knowing of these papers.

Another possibility is to see it as a symptom of a general retreat of subjective forms to ever fewer environments, with objective pronouns clearly the unmarked case. The only environment in which subjective pronouns seem under no threat is as subject of finite verbs, and (18) is perhaps evidence of a stricter delineation of that environment. Let me explain. The prototypical subject pronoun is of unambiguous person and number, constitutes the whole of its NP, and has the potential for concord with the verb. Prototypical instances get subjective case. It may be that *non*-prototypical subject pronouns are increasingly defaulting to the unmarked, objective case form. Two coordinated NPs will often differ in person, and the resultant NP may differ in number from its constituent NPs. In some dialects, then, a pronominal NP whose overall person and/or number bears an uncertain relation to the person/number of a pronoun within it, may no longer meet the conditions for use of a subjective form. Cf. Corbett's cross-linguistic work on gender resolution and on person resolution (1979, 1991): there is a clear hierarchy 1 > 2 > 3 in choice of overall person agreement when NPs of different person are coordinated. In English this can show in tag questions rather than verb or adjective inflection:

- (20) a. Me and you/her/John are going, aren't *we*?  
 b. You and him/John are going, aren't *you*?  
 c. Him and her/John are going, aren't *they*?

Pronouns which are modified, making them less like deictic or anaphoric elements and somewhat more like referential nouns, may likewise fail to be marked as subjective. Hence such data as (21-2), where a pronoun in subject function does not constitute the entire subject NP:

- (21) a. ... that *poor I* must write helter-skelter  
 (1832 Gaskell, *Letters* 2)
- b. \**He at the back* is responsible.
- c. *she who must be obeyed*  
 (?1970s John Mortimer, *Rumpole* [semi-quotation])
- d. ‘Suppose *we girls* take a turn,’ said Jane, laughing.  
 (1902 Nesbit, *5 Children* ii)
- (22) a. ... that *poor (old) me* must write helter-skelter
- b. ?*Him at the back* is responsible.
- c. *'er indoors*  
 (?1970s *Minder*)
- d. *Us girls* can always take a joke.

Somewhat similar observations, with some useful BrE and Canadian dialect data, have been made by Shorrocks (1992). Notice the (potential) default, third person verb in (22)a. Sentence (22)d is cited by Quirk et al. (1985: §6.5n.[c]) as an example of familiar speech; it can be used in dialects which would never admit *them girls* (for standard *those girls*) – n.b. 1 PL before 3 PL!<sup>10</sup> – indeed pairs like (21)d and (22)d are presumably responsible for hypercorrect forms like:

- (23) a. just in time for *we 4*, (Mr Gaskell, Marianne Meta & I) to go to Oxford  
 (1860 Gaskell, *Letters* 461)
- b. Rosemary sets a shining example to *we dithering dieters*  
 (1994 *Oldham Evening Chronicle* [headline])

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10. However, Richard Hogg and others pointed out that Scots dialects often allow invariant *they* rather than *them* as a determiner, and that as a determiner, *they/them* is used independently of the syntactic function of the NP. It is possibly unwise, therefore, to treat the difference in English dialects between *us girls* and *them girls* as a matter of either case or person. Derek Britton (p.c., 22 Apr 95, 15 Jun 95) explains that Scots determiner *they* is distal, being a descendant of OE *þa* rather than ON *þeir*, a phonetic development only possible for northerly dialects; however, south-western and Essex-S. Suffolk are PRO exchange areas in which *they* replaces *them* as emphatic (Orton et al. 1978: M83 THOSE), and these dialects apparently also have determiner *they*.

I ignore ‘substantivized’ pronouns as in *the miserable little me* as special cases; see Jespersen (1909: II 216, VII 223); they too always take a third person verb.

Further evidence that the notion of a prototypical subject pronoun is justified comes from Carol Chapman (p.c., 26 Jun 95), who notes that modern NE Yorkshire dialects show non-standard -s inflection throughout the present tense *except* when immediately preceded by a prototypical subject pronoun; compare the Northern Personal Pronoun Rule for ME discussed e.g. in McIntosh (1983: 237-9).

Whatever theory one uses, it seems clear that the data under discussion in this section demonstrate a weakening or breaking of the concord relationship between subject NP – or components of the subject NP – and finite verb. Going back to OE, almost every finite clause showed explicit nominative case somewhere on the subject NP, and explicit person-number inflection on the finite verb. Over the last thousand years, but mainly in ME, both ends of the mutual concord relation showed inflectional loss. All NPs except pronouns lost case marking. All verbs lost person-number inflection in the past tense (apart from 2 SG), then in the present, arguably for the latter in the order 1 SG, 2 SG, 3 SG, since 3 SG survives in standard. (BE is inconvenient in these sweeping generalisations.) And I have argued elsewhere (e.g. Denison in press) that the English auxiliary is tending towards complete invariance, a change which is perhaps linked to changes in personal pronoun distribution, which are always at the expense of subjective case.

Can we use the concept of markedness? I am a little reluctant, since for one thing syntactic and morphological markedness do not always run together, e.g. in subjunctive versus indicative. Relevant to us here is 3 SG in the present indicative, morphologically marked but on cross-linguistic grounds the syntactically *unmarked* person form (for example, because it is the default in

OE/ME impersonals, and because it is used when there is no explicit subject NP requiring concord). The 3 PL is used as the unmarked form in person resolution environments like (20). Third is also the most text-based and anaphoric of the persons and therefore perhaps has greatest need to be explicitly marked for syntactic function.

Can we extrapolate from these ideas to explain the apparent hierarchy of persons seen in the case changes I began with? I thought the *not me* material was quite interesting (in the British sense of *quite* “moderately”). And, even more speculative, can we detect a person hierarchy in other syntactic changes involving morphological case? Now that would be *quite* interesting (in the American sense of *quite*).

Many questions remain. Can the person hierarchy which I have demonstrated in one small environment be shown to apply also at an earlier date to the other two environments where subjective → objective? Where does second person fit in: before, with or after first? Does the hierarchy have any bearing on the change from genitive → objective before gerunds? And given the surprisingness of the Nesbit data to most PDE speakers, what other changes are going on in pronoun use? Indefinites and reflexives are on the move:

(24) You have to take the prosecution evidence because somebody who's defending *themselves* doesn't have to prove anything to you.

(1991 COBUILD Bank of English Corpus S0000000328 (radio phone-in))

Both are illustrated in (24). But that's a whole nother story – or indeed two.

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