

Agreement intervention: Logophoric selection in English epicene reflexivity

Andrew Kato

Department of Linguistics
University of California, Santa Cruz
amkato@ucsc.edu

SCULC UCLA
Sat. May 27, 2023

UC SANTA CRUZ

An increasing development in English is the use of pronominal *they* in **singular** contexts (e.g., Arnold et al., 2021; Baron, 2020; Everett, 2011):

Singular antecedents

- (1) John_i's a great person. I met **them**_i just last week.
 - (2) Taylor_i is writing their_i own autobiography.
- (Conrod, 2022, p. 216)

However, singular *they* is not a recent phenomenon (Balhorn, 2004).

Historical evidence

(3) [Swift in *Polite Conversation* (1738)]

Every fool_i can do as they_i're bid.

(Bjorkman, 2017, p. 2)

- Singular *they* precedes prescriptive movements favoring epicene (gender-neutral) *he* (Bodine, 1975).
- Distinctions between typical and atypical use-cases can nonetheless be made.

Arbitrary and generic reference is observedly more common:

Pragmatically-influenced

- (4) [Context: Seeing an unidentified distant figure.]
They're waving at us.
(Bjorkman, 2017, p. 1)

Arbitrary and generic reference is observedly more common:

Unknown gender

(5) Somebody_i left their_i sweater.

(Bodine, 1975, p. 139)

Preferred choice for quantification (Conrod, 2019, 2022):

Quantificationally-bound

(6) [Any person]_I who wants to succeed ought to try
their _{$\forall [i] \in I$} best.

(Conrod, 2022, p. 228)

Sensitive to specificity (Bjorkman, 2017; Conrod, 2019):

Determiner choice

(7) ?That syntax professor_i loves their_i job.

(8) A syntax professor_i must always love their_i job.

(Conrod, 2022, p. 218)

The most variable usage is definite specific singular *they* (dsT):

dsT antecedents

(9) Proper names: Jayden_i loves their_i job.

(10) Def. & spec.: That syntax professor_i loves their_i job.

(Conrod, 2022, p. 218)

- English is a ‘pronominal gender language’ (PGL) (Sigurðsson, 2019, p. 734).
- PGLs: Gender is always interpretable (iGender) and CP-externally dependent.

Interpretability:

CP-external

(11) At the halloween party, the cowgirl_i left his_i lasso in the kitchen.

(Ackerman, 2019, p. 2)

(12) Mary_i said [_{CP} that she_i was happy.]

(Sigurðsson, 2019, p. 735)

Obligatorily predicated on CP-external content:

Context-scanning

(13) CONTEXT [CP ... [DP ... D/G γ ...] ...]

(Sigurðsson, 2019, p. 735)

- Person $\rightarrow \pi$
- Number $\rightarrow \#$
- Gender $\rightarrow \gamma$ (e.g., Coon & Bale, 2014; Foley et al., 2021)

Gender self-identification:

(14) [Context: John identifies with they/them pronouns]

Their_{*i*} name is John_{*i*}.

(15) John_{*i*} smiled at them{self/selves}_{*i*} in the mirror.

Question #1

How is does dsT pronominalization relate to overall PGL morphosyntax?

Question #2

How can dsT-reflexive acceptability be accounted for morphosyntactically?

The inclusivity of they/them pronouns falls within overarching language reform among US English speakers.

- Orthographically: *woman* → *womxn*; *folks* → *folx*.
- Person-first language: E.g., *person with a disability*.
- Gender neutralization: *waitress* → *server*.

Avoiding Assumptions

Intention: Avoiding male deference via gender-neutral communication.

Prescriptive epicene *he*

(16) Everyone takes **his** time finding a seat. (Balhorn, 2004, p. 4)

How can we avoid 'generic *he*'?

How should nonbinary gender identity be represented?

→ *they/them/theirs*

Similar discussions in Dutch and German.

Per Chomsky (1965; 1981): Nominal items encode semantic features.

Agreement

(17) The marathon runners_[3 π , pl#] are_[be + pl] quite fast.

- Person: 1–3
- Number: {singular, plural}
- Gender: {masc., fem., neut.}
- ...

Pronominal agreement occurs based on antecedent gender.

- **CONDITION A:** An anaphor must be bound locally.
- **CONDITION B:** A pronominal must be non-locally bound.
- **CONDITION C:** An R-expression must be free.

(Chomsky, 1981; Rooryck & Vanden Wyngaerd, 2011)

Gender agreement

(18) **John_i**; hit his leg on the door, and **he_i**; fell.

(19) **Johannes_i**; liebt **sich_i**;
'Johannes loves himself.'

Grammatical gender generally is ...

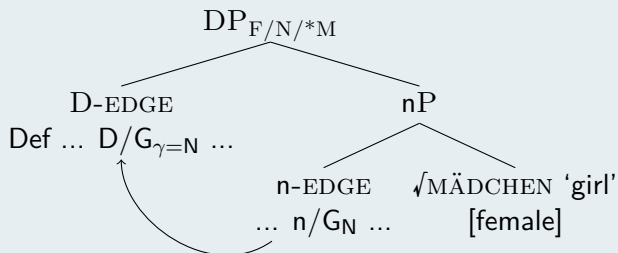
Gender classification

- Sorting of nouns into $2 \geq$ classes.
- Reflected by agreement with other items.
- Assigned at times based on features
{animacy, natural gender, ... }

(Kramer, 2020)

Mädchen 'girl.N': Arbitrarily neuter, pragmatically female.
Discourse-optional agreement: *es* 'it' or *sie* 'she'.

Gender locus



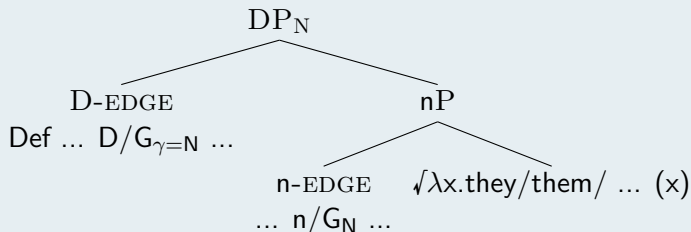
(Kramer, 2016, 2020; Panagiotidis, 2019; Sigurðsson, 2019, p.737)

DsT Antecedent Representation

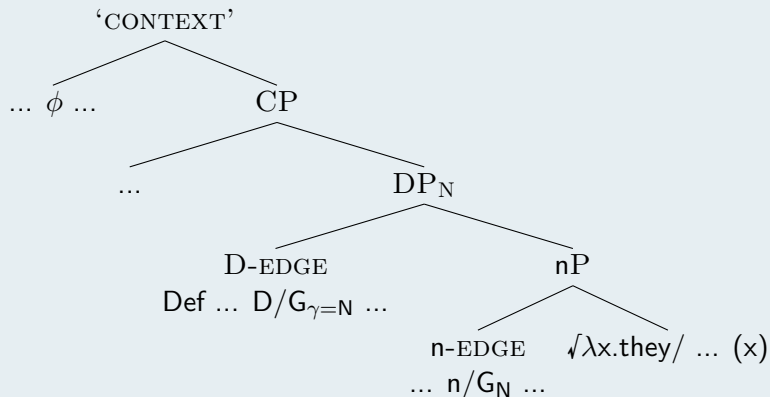
DsT reference

(20) [Context: John identifies with they/them pronouns]
John _{$\gamma=N$} hit his leg on the door, and **they** _{$\gamma=N$} fell.

Structural generalization



Structural generalization



- Conrod et al. (2022) find high variance in dsT-reflexive number.
- 'Slight preference' for *-self* with SG.

Gender classification (Conrod et al., 2022)

(21) E.g., split-nominal: [_{DP} [_{DP} them] [_{NP} selves]]

- Can *themselves* vs. *themselves* be theoretically deterministic?
- Locus of discourse-sensitive perspective, i.e. logophoricity.

CONDITION A exemption

(22) According to John_i, the article was written by Anna and himself_j. (Charnavel & Zlogar, 2016, p. 87)

(23) [_{DOMAIN} [OP_{deixis} [OP_{empathy} [OP_{attitude} ... X ...]]]]
(Charnavel & Zlogar, 2016, p. 87)

CONDITION A exemption

- (22) According to John_i, the article was written by Anna and himself_i. (Charnavel & Zlogar, 2016, p. 87)
- (23) [DOMAIN [OP_{deixis} [OP_{empathy} [OP_{attitude} ... X ...]]]]
(Charnavel & Zlogar, 2016, p. 87)

Thank you!

Questions/follow-ups: anmkato@ucsc.edu

Thanks to audience members at Johns Hopkins University, Cornell University, and UC Berkeley, along with Ruth Kramer and many others for various comments/support.

References

- Ackerman, B. (2019). Syntactic and cognitive issues in investigating gendered coreference. *Glossa: a Journal of General Linguistics*, 4(1): 117, 1–27.
- Ahn, B. (2019). Features, identity, and 'yourself'. *Proceedings of NELS 49, Volume One*, 15–24.
- Arnold, J. E., Mayo, H. C., & Dong, L. (2021). My pronouns are they/them: Talking about pronouns changes how pronouns are understood. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 28(5), 1688–1697. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-021-01905-0>
- Balhorn, M. (2004). The rise of epicene *they*. *The Journal of English Linguistics*, 32(2), 79–104.
- Baranowski, M. (2002). Current usage of the epicene pronoun in written English. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 6(3), 378–397. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9481.00193>
- Baron, D. E. (1981). The epicene pronoun: The word that failed. *American Speech*, 56(2), 83. <https://doi.org/10.2307/455007>
- Baron, D. (2020). *What's your pronoun? Beyond he & she*. Liverlight Publishing.
- Bjorkman, B. (2017). Singular *they* and the syntactic representation of gender in English. *Glossa: A Journal of General Linguistics*, 2(1): 80, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.374>

References (cont.)

- Bodine, A. (1975). Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar: Singular 'they', sex indefinite 'he', and 'he or she'. *Language in Society*, 4(2), 129–146.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500004607>
- Carvalho, D. S. (2019). On gender agreement in Brazilian Portuguese. In: Mathieu, É., Dali, M., & Zareikar, G. (Eds.). *Gender and noun classification*. Oxford University Press.
- Charnavel, I. (2021). Logophoricity, perspective, and reflexives. *Annual Review of Linguistics*, 7(1), 131–155.
- Charnavel, I. & Zlogar, C. (2016). English reflexive logophors. *Proceedings of the 51st Annual Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society (CLS51)*, 83–97.
- Chomsky, N. (1981). *Lectures on government and binding*. Dordrecht: Foris.
- Chomsky, N. (1995). *The minimalist program*. MIT Press.
- Conrod, K. (2019). *Pronouns raising and emerging*. Thesis, University of Washington.
- Conrod, K. (2022). Abolishing gender on D. *Canadian Journal of Linguistics/Revue canadienne de linguistique*, 67(3), 216–241.
- Conrod, K. (2022). How many selves for them?. *Proceedings of NELS 52, Volume One*, 177–186.

References (cont.)

- Coon, J., & Bale, A. (2014). The interaction of person and number in Mi'gmaq. *Nordlyd*, 40(1), 85–101.
- Corbett, G. G. (1991). *Gender*. Cambridge University Press.
- Déchine, R. (2019). Partitioning the nominal domain: The convergence of morphology, semantics, and pragmatics. In: Mathieu, É., Dali, M., & Zareikar, G. (Eds.). *Gender and noun classification*. Oxford University Press.
- Everett, C. (2011). Gender, pronouns, and thought: The ligature between epicene pronouns and a more gender neutral perception. *Gender and Language*, 5(1), 133–152.
- Foley, S., Kalivoda, N., & Toosarvandani, M. (2021). Gender-case constraints in Zapotec. *University of British Columbia Working Papers in Linguistics*, 1–15.
- Ko, H. (2014). *Edges in syntax: Scrambling and cyclic linearization*. Oxford University Press.
- Kramer, R. (2016). The location of gender features in the syntax. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 10, 661–677. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc.12226>
- Kramer, R. (2020). Grammatical gender: A close look at gender assignment across languages. *Annual Review of Linguistics*, 6(1), 45–66.
- Landau, I. (2015). DP-internal semantic agreement: A configurational analysis. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, 34, 975–1020.

References (cont.)

- Newman, M. (1992). Pronominal disagreements: The stubborn problem of singular epicene antecedents. *Language in Society*, 21(3), 447–475.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0047404500015529>
- Panagiotidis, P. (2019). (Grammatical) gender troubles and the gender of pronouns. In: Mathieu, É., Dali, M., & Zareikar, G. (Eds.). *Gender and noun classification*. Oxford University Press.
- Rooryck, J., & Vanden Wyngaerd, G. (2011). *Dissolving binding theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Bošković, Ž. (2011). On unvalued uninterpretable features. *Proceedings of NELS 39, Volume One*, 109–120.
- Sigurðsson, H. Á., (2008). The case of PRO. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, 26, 403–450.
- Sigurðsson, H. Á., (2019). Gender at the edge. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 50(4), 723–749.
- Wagers, M. W., Borja, M. F., & Chung, S. 2022. Processing reflexive pronouns when they don't announce themselves. *Glossa Psycholinguistics*, 1(1): 10, 1–41.
<https://doi.org/10.5070/G601174>
- Zwart, J. (2011). *The syntax of Dutch*. Cambridge University Press.