Agreement intervention: Logophoric selection in English epicene reflexivity

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Sat. May 27, 2023
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’s a great person. I met *them* just last week.
2. Taylor is writing *their* 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; can do as they;’re bid.
(Bjorkman, 2017, p. 2)
Historical Usage

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

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], who wants to succeed ought to try their[$i \in I$] best.
(Conrod, 2022, p. 228)
Sensitive to specificity (Bjorkman, 2017; Conrod, 2019):

Determiner choice

(7) ?That syntax professor; loves their; job.
(8) A syntax professor; must always love their; job.

(Conrod, 2022, p. 218)
The most variable usage is definite specific singular *they* (dsT):

**dsT antecedents**

(9) Proper names: Jayden, loves their job.
(10) Def. & spec.: That syntax professor, loves their job.

(Conrod, 2022, p. 218)
Context of Gender

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

**CP-external**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(11) At the halloween party, the cowgirl left his lasso in the kitchen.</td>
<td><em>(Ackerman, 2019, p. 2)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12) Mary said [ \text{CP that she was happy.} ]</td>
<td><em>(Sigurðsson, 2019, p. 735)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Context of Gender

Obligatorily predicated on CP-external content:

\[ \text{Context-scanning} \]

\[(13) \text{CONTEXT } [\text{CP } \ldots [\text{DP } \ldots \text{D}/\text{G}\gamma \ldots ] \ldots ] \]

(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\textsubscript{i} name is John\textsubscript{i}.

(15) John\textsubscript{i} smiled at them\{self/selves\}\textsubscript{i} in the mirror.
Primary questions

Question #1

How does dsT pronominalization relate to overall PGL morphosyntax?
Primary questions

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: \textit{woman} $\rightarrow$ \textit{womxn}; \textit{folks} $\rightarrow$ \textit{folx}.
- Person-first language: E.g., \textit{person with a disability}.
- Gender neutralization: \textit{waitress} $\rightarrow$ \textit{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/their

Similar discussions in Dutch and German.
Per Chomsky (1965; 1981): Nominal items encode semantic features.

**Agreement**

(17) The marathon runners[^3π, 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)

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**Gender agreement**

(18) **John;** hit his leg on the door, and **he;** fell.

(19) **Johannes;** liebt **sich;**

‘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)

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

DsT reference

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

\[
\text{John}_{\gamma=N} \text{ hit his leg on the door, and } \text{they}_{\gamma=N} \text{ fell.}
\]

Structural generalization

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{DP}_N \\
&\quad \text{D-EDGE} \\
&\quad \text{Def } \ldots \text{ D}/G_{\gamma=N} \ldots \\
&\quad \text{n-EDGE} \\
&\quad \sqrt{\lambda x. \text{they/them}/ \ldots} (x) \\
&\quad \ldots \text{n}/G_N \ldots
\end{align*}
\]
DsT Antecedent Representation

Structural generalization

'CONTEXT'

... φ ...

CP

... 

DP_N

D-EDGE

Def ... D/G_{γ=N} ...

nP

n-EDGE

\sqrt{\lambda x. \text{they/} ... (x)}

... n/G_N ...

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Agreement Intervention and Logophoricity (SCULC 2023) 23 / 31
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: \([_{DP} \ [_{DP} \ them]] \ [_{NP} \ selves]]\)
Implications and Direction

- Can *themself* 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\(_i\). (Charnavel & Zlogar, 2016, p. 87)

(23) \[
\text{DOMAIN} \ [ \text{OP}_{\text{deixis}} \ [ \text{OP}_{\text{empathy}} \ [ \text{OP}_{\text{attitude}} \ldots \text{X} \ldots ]]]
\]
(Charnavel & Zlogar, 2016, p. 87)
According to John\textsubscript{i}, the article was written by Anna and himself\textsubscript{i}. (Charnavel & Zlogar, 2016, p. 87)

\[(\text{DOMAIN } [\text{OP}\text{deixis} [\text{OP}\text{empathy} [\text{OP}\text{attitude} \ldots X \ldots ]]])]\]

(Charnavel & Zlogar, 2016, p. 87)
Thank you!

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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


