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# The grammar of English pronouns<sup>☆,☆☆</sup>

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## Abstract

A solution is proposed to explain the way personal pronouns enter into coordinations. This involves contrasting 1st person singular with the other pronouns. In essence, 1sg 'subject' form *I* is preferred as second member of a coordination (as in *John and I are going*, rather than *\*I and John are going*) whereas for the other pronouns the 'subject' form (*she, he, we, they*) is preferred as first member of a coordination (as in *She and John are going*, rather than *\*John and she are going*). 1sg also differs in that either *I* or *me* can function as copula complement (*It was I* or *It was me*) whereas for other pronouns only the non-subject form is acceptable in non-contrastive contexts (*It was him*, not *\*It was he*). The syntactic implications of these principles are examined. There is also discussion of the role of pronouns in 'gapping' constructions. © 2017 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Pronouns in English typically function as complete noun phrases (NPs) which can fill an argument slot in clause structure. However, pronouns do not always behave like other NPs.

For example, beginning with

(1) Mary loves John and Jane loves Pete

the repeated verb, *loves*, may be omitted (this is called 'gapping'), giving:

(2) Mary loves John and Jane Pete

In contrast, if we start with

(3) Mary loves John and he loves you

<sup>☆</sup> I am in debt to many previous accounts of English pronouns, including Jespersen (1933: 132–6); Mencken (1936: 454–9; 1948: 371–4); Quirk et al. (1985: 337–9); Burchfield (1989: 57–9); Declerck (1991: 273–5); Wales (1996: 94–109); Payne and Huddleston (2002: 458–63), and Mair (2006: 143–4). Quinn (2005) assembled materials from questionnaires to students in New Zealand, and came up with a database similar to mine; she did not attempt explanation of it.

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the repeated verb, *loves*, may not be omitted. That is, one cannot say:

- (4) \*Mary loves John and he you

It appears that one cannot ‘gap’ around pronouns (and this holds whatever the pronouns may be). This topic is further discussed in Section 5.

Turning to a different matter (that which is the focus of this article): not all pronouns behave in the same way. Sentence (5) is easily acceptable, while (6) is rather marginal:

- (5) Have you heard about Mary, she and John are getting married  
(6) ??Have you heard about Mary, John and she are getting married

However, when *I* is used in place of *she*, the situation is reversed. Sentence (7) is scarcely admissible, and (8) is acceptable:

- (7) \*I and John are getting married  
(8) John and I are getting married

The present article seeks to explore some of the fundamental properties of pronouns in Standard English.<sup>1</sup> It is not cast in terms of any esoteric ‘theory’. My intention is simply to describe the facts, and principles of functional use, and—where possible—offer explanations for them. It is shown that the grammatical behaviour of pronouns is not entirely determined by syntactic relations (subject, object, and so on); other factors play a significant role.

## 2. Aims

This investigation is concerned with 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person pronouns as they function in core and peripheral argument slots within a clause. It is not concerned with possessive forms of pronouns.

There is a healthy—although sometimes vituperative—debate concerning what is ‘correct’. Some people insist on saying *It is I* and reject *It is me*; others adopt the reverse position. Similarly for *She is cleverer than I* and *She is cleverer than me*. Where there is debate, I take the position that both alternatives should be regarded as acceptable.

The grammatical possibilities for pronouns have shifted a good deal over time. Shakespeare’s use differs significantly from that of the language today. In order to describe a fairly homogeneous system, I have only considered example sentences from about 1900 on.

This paper will attempt to formulate the canonical patterns of use for pronouns. Linguistics is a science describing human behaviour, and thus differs from a discipline such as physics in that it uncovers pervasive tendencies rather than fixed rules. Most statements in grammar are of a ‘more/less’ rather than a ‘yes/no’ nature. There is probably no area of modern English grammar which shows more fluidity than that of pronoun behaviour. A variety of exceptions can certainly be found to the principles stated here. However, they are generally recognisable as exceptions, and this serves to confirm the principles.

The 1st person singular (1sg) pronoun, *I/me*, has markedly different grammatical behaviour from the other pronouns, and is most profitably discussed separately. (Failure to recognise this has led previous researchers to obtain somewhat blurred results.)

## 3. Pronouns other than 1st person singular

### 3.1. The forms

The forms of non-1sg pronouns fall into two sets. That sometimes called ‘nominative’ is here referred to as the ‘S set’ (from the first letter of *she*) and that called ‘accusative’ as the ‘H set’ (from the first letter of *her*). 2nd person, *you*, and 3rd person singular neuter, *it*, have the same form for each set.

<sup>1</sup> Over a period of several decades, I have paid attention to what people said around me, and noted examples from books, dictionaries, and a variety of other corpora. (including COCA, the Corpus of Contemporary American English).

A major source has, naturally, been my own knowledge and intuition, as a native speaker of British (and Australian) English but this has, of course, been fully checked against other resources. I have also made use of the extensive materials collected while researching and writing Dixon (1991, 2005).

All generalisations have been checked against data in COCA and other corpora.

There are of course differences in Non-standard varieties of English, on which there is much recent literature. These would be the topic for a separate study.

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