A deficient indexical in British English: an analysis of singular ‘us’

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In British English, the non-nominative 1P plural pronoun us can be used with 1P singular (i.e., indexical) reference (henceforth ‘singular us’) (see Snell 2007 and references therein). (Contrary to a claim in Snell 2007, I will show in the talk that singular us has an extremely varied syntactic distribution and is not restricted to imperatives.)

(1) Give us one minute! ⇔ Give me one minute!

Two properties of singular us distinguish it from ‘standard’ me and have not been discussed in the literature: (i) it is obligatorily de se (2) and (ii) it cannot be a bound variable (3). Regarding (i), note that obligatory reference de se is rare, seemingly only holding of logophoric pronouns and obligatorily controlled PRO (e.g., Morgan 1970, Schlenker 1999, 2003, though this has been challenged, e.g., Pearson 2015, Pearson & Roeper 2022). Yet singular us can’t be unified with logophoric pronouns and PRO; they’re restricted to embedded attitude reports and are bound by the closest c-commanding attitude holder. Singular us is licit in matrix and embedded clauses and always refers to the actual speaker. Moreover, assuming discourse participants ([speaker],[hearer]) are syntactically represented in root clauses (but not embedded ones) (Speas and Tenny 2003), if singular us was bound by a SPEAKER argument it’s not subject to the same locality constraints as logophors or controlled PRO. Reference de se of singular us is then something new. Regarding (ii), standard 1P pronouns (including I, me) can be variables (Partee 1989, Kratzer 1998) meaning they don’t always refer to the speaker at the current context (‘fake indexicals’, Kratzer 2009). Singular us never has a fake indexical reading—it always refers to the actual speaker at the utterance context.

(2) a. I dreamt that I was Chomsky and Valeria gave me_{de se} flowers.
   b. I dreamt that I was Chomsky and I_{de se} hired me_{de se} as a research assistant.

(3) Only I ate something that made me / *us sick.

In this talk I show that singular us is an entirely new English pronominal creature. I propose it consists maximally of a [π] head specified for [speaker] but lacks [#] features. I argue the absence of [#] means singular us lacks a ϕP projection that is necessary for a bound variable reading. Further, it is too structurally deficient to project KP—as a result, the form ‘us’ is the unmarked/default case (accusative), hence it never shows up in other case environments.

Indexicality. What makes singular us so interesting is that it behaves how we might expect 1P singular pronouns to behave on a naïve theory of indexicals. That is, if the reference of a 1P singular pronoun always depended on the utterance context, it should always refer to the actual speaker of the current utterance (Kaplan 1989). Moreover, indexicals should carry obligatory self-ascription/de se reference—for a speaker to use an indexical she must know she is talking about herself (Perry 1979). But recent work has shown that 1P singular pronouns do not consistently behave this way cross-linguistically. E.g., in English dream reports ‘me’ can have (non de se) de re reference; there are ‘fake indexicals’, where a 1/2P pronoun is interpreted as a bound variable; there are ‘shifty indexicals’—1P pronouns that refer to a third person attitude holder (e.g., Anand and Nevis 2004); the notion of ‘indexiphoricity’, discussed by e.g., Coppock & Weschler 2018, Deal 2018, 2020, has been described as first person inflectional agreement encoding logophoric (i.e., 3P) information. Thus it is well established in the literature that there are 1P singular expressions that do not refer to the actual speaker of the current context. Given that pronominal indexicals cross-linguistically come with all of these other properties, it’s intriguing that singular us appears to be an indexical in the purest sense. I argue this rigidity is a consequence of structural deficiency.
A weak pronoun. Singular us is prosodically weak (it can’t be stressed, coordinated or modified (Cardinaletti & Starke 1999)). I assume a prosodically weak pronoun is also structurally deficient.

(4) a. # Don’t give the cookies to USSG, give them to JOHN.
b. # Emma has brought cookies for Tom and USSG.
c. # Yesterday’s USSG hated cookies.

Generally, the more deficient a pronoun, the less semantically restricted it becomes—deficient pronouns can be variables, pick out human and non-human referents and be arguments or predicates (D´echaine and Wiltschko 2002). Singular us flips these generalizations on their head: it is a deficient pronoun that is extremely semantically restricted—it only ever picks out the actual speaker.

Proposal. The above showed that singular us is an obligatorily de se 1P pronoun that always refers to the actual speaker at the utterance context. Although this sounds like a run of the mill indexical, it’s in fact extremely puzzling in light of recent work showing that 1/2P pronouns may be extremely semantically flexible and often do not refer to the current speaker. To account for this, I propose singular us has the structure in (5)—it consists only of a [π] head specified for 1P. It has no number features. The interpretation of us as a singular pronoun is resolved pragmatically—the utterance speaker is a singular individual. I claim the absence of [#] features is what forces singular us to be semantically rigid. I adopt the structure in (6), consisting of KP, DP ϕP (which contains [#] and [π] projections) and NP, for a non-deficient pronoun. Further, I assume the functional sequence may not skip nodes. This means in the absence of [#], ϕP is also absent. I claim it is ϕP that gives English indexicals their flexible semantics. E.g., D´echaine and Wiltschko (2015) argue that English 1/2P indexicals are pro-DPs while ‘fake indexicals’ (1/2P bound variables) are pro-ϕPs (the loss of D entails the loss of diectic features). For Kratzer 2009, fake indexicals are born underspecified for their ϕ-features (they are indices), instead getting those features via feature transmission. I propose that it is ϕP specifically that matters here. The features on [π] and [#] determine the form of the pronoun for VI (e.g., [1SG] → ‘I’ or ‘me’); when ϕ is co-indexed with [π] and [#] for [1SG] (i.e., ϕ-complete) we have an indexical pronoun, but when ϕ is underspecified it may receive ϕ-features from somewhere else (e.g., v for Kratzer 2009) and is a ‘fake indexical’. Crucially, without ϕP a 1P pronoun cannot be a bound variable (it is always indexical). I claim singular us is the product of the absence of ϕP. Note too that without [#] the input for VI is just [1], which thus allows for a different exponent (‘us’) from [1SG] (‘me’).

(5) [πP π [speaker] [N]]

(6) [KP K [DP ϕ [ϕP # [πP π [NP N]]]]]

Singular us thus offers new generalizations about deficient pronouns. While structural deficiency allows for freer semantics up to a point (e.g., 1/2P indexicals are pro-DPs, while fake indexicals are pro-ϕPs), too much deficiency can reintroduce rigidity. That is, a pro-πP is not big enough to be a bound variable (it cannot have an underspecified ϕ head) thus only has an indexical reading like pro-DPs. This analysis also correctly predicts that singular us is always accusative. Fenger (2018) argues that the Dutch impersonal men is an imp-N, lacking a ϕP layer. The lack of ϕP means that men cannot project KP (because we cannot skip nodes) and so men only appears in nominative case environments (the Dutch default/unmarked case). Lack of ϕP in singular us (5) also means KP is not projected and thus we only find singular us in unmarked/default accusative case.