

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

Beccy Lewis. The University of Connecticut

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! \mapsto 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 re/de se} / us*_{de re/de se} flowers.
b. I dreamt that I was Chomsky and I_{de se} hired me_{de re} / #us_{de re} 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 $[\pi]$ head specified for [speaker] but lacks [#] features. I argue the absence of [#] means singular *us* lacks a ϕ P 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 Nevins 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 **US**_{SG}, give them to JOHN.
 b. # Emma has brought cookies for Tom and **us**_{SG}.
 c. # Yesterday's **us**_{SG} 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 (Déchaine 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 $[\pi]$ 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 ϕ P (which contains [#] and $[\pi]$ projections) and NP, for a non-deficient pronoun. Further, I assume the functional sequence may not skip nodes. This means in the absence of [#], ϕ P is also absent. I claim it is ϕ P that gives English indexicals their flexible semantics. E.g., Déchaine and Wiltschko (2015) argue that English 1/2P indexicals are pro-DPs while 'fake indexicals' (1/2P bound variables) are pro- ϕ Ps (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 ϕ P specifically that matters here. The features on $[\pi]$ and [#] determine the form of the pronoun for VI (e.g., [1SG] \mapsto 'I' or 'me'); when ϕ is co-indexed with $[\pi]$ 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., ν for Kratzer 2009) and is a 'fake indexical'. Crucially, without ϕ P a 1P pronoun cannot be a bound variable (it is always indexical). I claim singular *us* is the product of the absence of ϕ P. Note too that without [#] the input for VI is just [1], which thus allows for a different exponent ('us') from [1SG] ('me').

- (5) $[\pi_P \pi [\text{speaker}] [\text{N}]]$ (6) $[\text{KP} \text{K} [\text{DP} \text{D} [\phi_P \phi [\#_P \# [\pi_P \pi [\text{NP} \text{N}]]]]]]$

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- ϕ Ps), too much deficiency can reintroduce rigidity. That is, a pro- π P 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 ϕ P layer. The lack of ϕ P 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 ϕ P in singular *us* (5) also means KP is not projected and thus we only find singular *us* in unmarked/default accusative case.

Select references. Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002. Decomposing pronouns. LI 33:3. Déchaine and Wiltschko 2015. When and why can 1st and 2nd person pronouns be bound variables? NELS 40. Fenger 2018. How impersonal does one get? J Comp German Linguistics. Kratzer 2009. Making a pronoun. LI 40:2. Snell 2007. Give us my shoe back: the pragmatic functions of singular 'us'. Leeds Working Papers in Linguistics and Phonetics.