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What Does It Mean To Agree? Coreference With Singular *They*

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THE PROBLEM

How do pronouns agree with antecedents?

Proposal:

- Coreference for bound and free pronouns has different requirements.
- Different speakers have different requirements on matching φ -features of pronouns to their antecedents.

Consequences:

- Interspeaker variation of grammaticality for singular they
- Intraspeaker variation: potentiality for switching pronouns about a single referent between *they* and *he/she*

SINGULAR *THEY*

Bjorkman (2017): **singular they is underspecified**, but can't occur with gendered names/nouns. Speakers who allow (specific, definite) sg. *they* have a contrast:

- (1) %My friend_i left their_i sweater here.
- (2) *Janet_i left their_i sweater here.

Bjorkman (2017: 5,6)

Bjorkman's analysis:

- singular *they* is an 'elsewhere' condition: only available when he, she, and it aren't
- gender features in English are optional and non-contrastive.
- Features are MASC/FEM and (contrastively) SINGULAR and INANIMATE
- "singular" *they* has no features—radically underspecified

GRAMMATICALITY

The way "agreement" is conceptualized for gendered pronouns is a problem: Is (3) *ungrammatical*, or is it *inappropriate*?

- (3) *Geoff_i is coming to campus. [...] She_i is bringing a computer.

If (3) is ungrammatical, then what about (4)? Some report ungrammaticality for (4a), some report ungrammaticality for (4b). **Important:** there are social factors at play here.

- (4) a. (*)Kirby_i is coming to campus. [...] They_i are bringing a computer.
b. (*)Kirby_i is coming to campus. [...] She_i is bringing a computer.

DATA

Pronoun switches in the same conversation about the same referent are attested and grammatical.

Data from sociolinguistic study on gender and pronouns (Conrod 2017); transgender participants & acquaintances/strangers: pair interview and solo interview designed to elicit third person pronouns about real referents:

(5)

A: His partner at the time was also dating this other person_i that was in our group. Um, and **they_i** have a very, um, **he_i's** a very strong and kind of controlling personality, and so **he_i** had kind of taken over like the whole thing, and [...]

B: **He_i** started blaming different people to different people[...]

A: Ha. Yes. it kind of, that was kind of one of those things where it just- and that same person_i, I would see **them_i** more often than I would see P. and **they_i** were trying to like convince me of these like negative things [...]

Constructed examples that strongly resemble things you've probably heard:

(6)

A: I went out with someone new last night.

B: Oh? Is **he_i** a student?

A: No, **they_i**'re from my knitting group.

B: Do you think you'll go out with **them_i** again?

Avoid revealing gender

(7)

A: That student left **their_i** backpack!

B: I'll go tell **them_i** .

A: Thanks, I don't want **her_i** to lose it!

Not knowing gender yet

Note: Gricean maxim of Quantity—singular *they* allows more vague/more specific options, so revealing/withholding information is pragmatically conditioned

PROPOSAL

Two different ways for a pronoun to "agree" with an antecedent: either it can disallow conflicting features (8a) or it can require complete matching of features (8b).

(8)

a. * α [φ :MASC]_i β [φ :FEM]_i

≈Do not coindex if α has a gender feature and β has a conflicting gender feature.

b. α [φ :x]_i ... β [φ :x]_i

≈Only coindex if α has exactly the same gender feature(s) as β

The strictest rule (8b) applies to all pronouns bound by an antecedent under c-command. **Some speakers** relax their rules for free pronouns (8a).

DISCUSSION

Differences between bound and free:

(9) ***He_i** respects **themselves/themself_i**

Bound pronouns have stricter rules. Why? Because of how φ -features enter the derivation, or how agreement is calculated in a phase--future work

Differences between speakers who do or don't have (8a) as a rule mean that agreement needs to be parameterizable; underspecification allows intraspeaker variation—switching (Adger and Smith 2010)

We need to rethink "grammaticality" where judgments of sentences are sensitive to social relationships and identity; φ -agreement conceptualized more like honorifics (Brown and Levinson 1987)

CITATIONS

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