PRONOMINAL USAGE IN DIALECTAL ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Altogether six maps taken from The computer developed linguistic atlas of England (Viereck and Ramisch 1991, 1997) serve to demonstrate peculiarities of pronominal usage in English dialects. In the area of personal pronouns, phenomena such as pronoun exchange, gender diffusion and the lack of formal gender distinctions are discussed. Moreover, the question is addressed why the weak form of us survives today as against the strong forms in me and we. As regards possessives, anaphoric and deictic functions are differentiated and it is shown that subject-referring possessive pronouns once were reflexive possessives in English, as they were or are in other languages now.

In her book The English language in modern times (since 1400) Margaret Schlauch also has a chapter on “Modern English dialects and their literary uses” which contains insightful observations on quite a number of aspects. As regards personal pronominal usage we find the following passage in the section on “Southern English dialects”:

The pronouns preserve traces of Old English forms elsewhere replaced by others: the archaic thou and ye as in Biblical usage, and also en (-m by assimilation) for the masculine dative – accusative, em (never them) for the plural of the same case. Personal pronouns are used to refer to inanimate things. Very striking is the use of nominative forms for emphatic accusatives. This is said to be so consistent that it might be more accurate to say that all pronouns have two forms in the accusative: one for emphasis, coinciding with the nominative, and a separate one developed from historical oblique forms, now serving in unemphatic constructions. Barnes illustrates the difference by these expressions: Gi’e en the knife; Gi’e us the wheat; but: Gi’e the money to I (we) not to he (they).

(Schlauch 1959: 165f.).
The phenomena that came later to be called pronoun exchange and gender diffusion had thus already been observed by Schlauch.\(^1\)

Pronominal usage, of course, also varies in the Standard language, not, however, to the same extent as in the dialects. In Standard English:

Subjective personal pronouns function as subject and sometimes as subject complement; objective personal pronouns as object, prepositional complement, and sometimes as subject complement ... *He* was late, *it* was *he* [but also] *it* was *him* ... Although the prescriptive grammar tradition stipulates the subjective case form, the objective case form is normally felt to be the natural one, particularly in informal style. However, the choice occurs chiefly in this restricted and infrequent construction with final pronouns, *ie* in ‘object territory’ ... After *but*, *except*, *than*, and as ... there is [also] vacillation ...:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nobody} & \begin{cases} 
\text{but} \\
\text{except}
\end{cases} \begin{cases} 
\text{him} \\
\text{he}
\end{cases} & \text{can solve our problems.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{He is} & \begin{cases} 
\text{more [or less] intelligent than} \\
\text{as intelligent as}
\end{cases} \begin{cases} 
\text{she} \\
\text{her}
\end{cases} ...
\end{align*}
\]

The prescriptive bias for the subjective forms may account for hypercorrect uses of them, as in *between you and I ... Let you and I do it!* *He* says *she* saw you and *I* last night, which are not uncommon in informal conversation.

(Quirk et al. 1972: 208 and 210 f.)

I would like to present some maps from our computer developed linguistic Atlas of England (Viereck and Ramisch 1991, 1997) for which the data were taken from Harold Orton’s Survey of English Dialects, published between 1962 and 1971.

The first three maps (or, for reasons of space, rather the legends to the maps) relate to gender diffusion, namely “If you want to know how heavy a thing is, what do you do? weigh it” (Figure 1), “Jack wants to have Tommy’s ball and says to him, not: Keep it!, but ... Give it me” (Figure 2) and “Before your wife brings you the broth, she is certain to have [gesticulate] ... tasted it” (Figure 3). The answers are on the one hand quite similar, yet on the other there are also noticeable differences. On all three legends *it* occurs most often to be followed by *en, em,\(^2\) him and them*. A look at the frequencies of occurrence of these last-mentioned forms, however, is revealing. On the legend *to weigh it, en* occurs 38 times and *him* 7 times, on the legend *Give it me* the numbers for *en* are 26 and for *em* 13, although it was suggested by the question. When we add the numbers for *en/him* and *en/em* they come very close to one another, namely 45 with *to weigh it* and 39 with *Give it me*. The situation is different with the legend *tasted it* where *en* was noted only 8 times and *em* only once. In addition the feminine pronoun *her* was elicited twice. The results are quite similar in questions of a related context, which for proportional reasons could not be mapped in our atlas, namely *to thicken it* (i.e. the gravy) with only 7 *en* forms, some of which added from the incidental material, one *him* and 2 *her* forms, one taken from the incidental material, *to cool it* (i.e. the tea) with one *en* form in Cornwall and *to bind it* (i.e. the corn), again with one *en* form in Cornwall, this time taken from the incidental material.\(^3\) The scarcity of *en* forms in all these last-mentioned cases can hardly be accidental. The answer to account for the differences between the first and the second group of things/objects, not of living entities, lies in the referent. When it is a count noun, such as *thing* and *ball*, it can be referred to with *him, en* and *em* in western and southwestern English dialects, when the referent is a mass noun like *broth* this possibility is quite restricted, almost non-existent. However, ten informants clustered in the north of England apparently consider *broth* a count noun as they answered with *them*.\(^4\) Such reclassifications of mass nouns as count nouns also occur in Standard English, of course: “What breads have you got today? meaning ‘kind of’ or ‘type of’?” (Quirk et al. 1972: 128).

Pronominal exchange works both ways, so to speak: a subjective pronoun can be found in positions that usually require the objective case and vice versa. The *Give it me*-legend (Figure 2) provides examples of the first type: *give it I, give it to I, give en to I*. These cases required the nominative in Barnes’ day and region, as noted by Schlauch. As the legend shows, this usage is still attested by Orton’s survey in the southwest of England, although it is clearly a receding dialectal phenomenon: *me/us* dominate now even in that part of England. There are scattered instances in other questions of Orton’s survey where *he* is used as the objective case, as, for example, in “I knew he by his voice”, “brought he up or

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1 Surprisingly, book publications on personal pronouns deal with these aspects only in passing; see, for example, Howe (1996) and Wales (1996).

2 *En* and *em* are derived from the Old English masc. acc. *hine* and the Old English masc. dative *hime* respectively. *Hine* survived until the 14th century in the South. In the other areas it was replaced by the dative *hime* two centuries earlier. *Em* could also be an assimilated form of *en*: see the answer *give en me* in a number of Devon and Cornwall localities (Figure 2).

3 In the answers to *to cool it* and *to bind it* the pronoun has, unfortunately, been omitted rather often.

4 The plural (*ihem*) was noted once each in Lancashire and Norfolk with regard to *corn*.
"ask he"; she as object occurs even less often; cf. "stock she up" and "brought she up" (Wakelin 1972: 113f).

The second type of pronoun exchange becomes apparent in the responses to the question "Which of you is English here? As for her you could answer ... she is" (Figure 4). She is the dominating form by far, whose Middle English origin is obscure. Moreover, we find hoo (from Old English hēo), shoo and what seems to be the object pronoun her, here used in subjective position. However, "her may simply be the unstressed reflex ([ha], [ə]) of O[kl] E[nglish] hēo 'she' plus the r which is often attached to final unstressed [ə]" in rhotic dialect areas (Wakelin 1972: 164; on she/h[er] see Black 1999). Shoo is confined to southwest Yorkshire. As it occurs between she and hoo forms to the west, shoo seems to be a blend of she and hoo.

In the answers to some questions of Orton's survey he, going back to Old English hēo 'she', is found in scattered fashion, such as in Berkshire and Kent. In Middle English the use of he meaning 'she' was much more widespread, as the map in McIntosh et al. (1986: 308) shows. Wright (1902: s.v. 'he') noted he meaning 'she' and 'it' for a wide area mainly in the West Midlands and the southwest of England. The Survey of English dialects elicited he for it only occasionally, as in bank he up (once in Somerset) and he is down (once in Hampshire), both referring to the plashing of a hedge. Thus both uses of he are drastically receding in dialectal English and with them the lack of formal gender distinctions in the personal pronoun system which used to be a characteristic feature mainly in the dialects of the West of England.

The following general points emerge from the preceding paragraphs. One is that it is possible in dialectal English for the personal pronouns to exchange their subjective and objective roles, but the conditions under which these exchanges occur are anything but clear. From Elworthy in 1877, via Barnes in 1886, Kruisenga in 1905 and Wright in 1905, to Wakelin in 1972, we get the same explanation, namely that subject forms are used as emphatic object forms and object forms are used for the nominative when the pronouns are emphatic. The term emphatic is, unfortunately, not specified and I do not see that personal pronouns are used emphatically—in the way I understand this term—in the responses mentioned: Give it I or to I. I knew he by his voice, brought he up or ask he.

Other factors must play a role here, such as, for example, adjacency to verbs and/or prepositions or interrogative or question tag contexts (Wagner 2001). Another factor might be style (Ihalainen 1985: 160). All these factors lead to corpus research as the most promising means to single out the conditioning factors for this most interesting phenomenon.

The other point is, apart from the lack of formal gender distinctions, that the plural is used for the singular. On the legend to the map Give it me (Figure 2) the use of us for me is very widespread indeed (see also Wright 1905: s.v. 'us').

The object case plural of the first person is also interesting with regard to the vowel, as the weak, unstressed form developed into present-day English—in contrast to the object case singular and subject case plural (me and we) where the strong forms prevailed. How do authors of historical grammars of English account for the difference? Welna notes: "The long vowel in ās survived throughout the period [of Middle English] (cf. <uus> in the ‘Paston Letters’), but an early shortening is evidenced in Orm; cf. <uuss>. Like in the pronoun wē/wē, length in us depended on the presence or absence of stress" (1996: 101). Moreover, Welna offers the following explanation for post Middle English: "The failure of original [u:] to preserve length may have been caused by this short word functioning as an enclitic (cf. let's, or tell's in Shakespeare)" (1996: 101).

Pinsser (1969: 169) notes: "In weak stress all long vowels are shortened, e.g. ās (Mod. Engl. dial. [auz])! — ās (> [əz])" (translated from German). The "<e> in the quotation is strange since Pinsser only notes stressed forms for mē and wē, thus leaving only ās ~ ās anyhow. Also, the pronunciation [auz] that developed from the strong form and that, according to Pinsser, is found in modern dialectal English was neither recorded by Wright (1905) nor by the Survey of Eng-

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8 Interrogative sentences had already been mentioned by Elworthy (1877) and Kruisenga (1905).
9 I have to be selective here, of course.
10 Fisiak and Krygier (2002: 231) investigate the spellings of selected features of the two manuscripts of Laȝamon's Brut: "... both are assigned a date of composition in the second half of the thirteenth century; one of them, Cotton Caligula A IX, is usually localised in Worcestershire, while the other, Otho C XIII, is placed [by McIntosh et al. 1986 in Somerset]. Altogether three samples from each manuscript were obtained. With regard to the first person plural pronoun the authors conclude: "The only marked difference concerns oblique cases in the O2 sample, where virtually the only acceptable spelling is <uas>, almost completely absent from all the other excerpts. This feature confirms the general impression that the later sections of the Otho MS are more advanced and innovative linguistically" (2002: 241). The authors are silent on pronunciation. The spelling <uas>, of course, reflects the long vowel, but taking Orm's evidence into account the spellings <uas> and <uws> might well hide an occasional shortening of the vowel.
lish dialects.¹¹ Faiss (1977: 193f.) has the following to say: "Apart from strong-stressed ous, [u:s], there exists in Middle English weakly stressed us [us] that survives in Late Middle English and Early Modern English as well as in dialectal English [uz], but was replaced in Modern Standard English by [as]. That Middle English [us] did not develop even in strong stress into Modern English [aus] is quite possibly connected with the little marked length of the vowel: rather [us] than [usz]" (translated from German). It is inconceivable why only us should have had a half-long vowel and not me and we.

Mańczak (1987), who devotes a whole book to irregular sound change due to frequency, surprisingly does not mention this aspect. However, a look at the frequency figures may help to solve this problem. Hofland and Johansson (1982) present the following figures for British and American English respectively: me – 1,554 and 1,181, we – 2,926 and 2,653, and us only 657 and 672. In Thorndike and Lorge (1944) the discrepancy is still greater: me – 23,364, we – 17,996, and us – 4,943, are the numbers of occurrence in the Lorge magazine count. This is indeed suggestive, as both me and we must naturally have occurred much more often in stressed position than us and, consequently, the likelihood that the strong forms in me and we developed into present-day English was much greater. This also seems to be the reason why in the 3rd sg masculine subject case the Middle English strong form [he:] prevailed over the weak form [he] in Modern English. The Lorge magazine count notes a frequency of 49,268 for he.

Frequency, no doubt, plays an important part in the history of language. The notion should, however, be used with caution. It is, of course, problematic to base diachronically related frequencies on frequency dictionaries of present-day English. However, a frequency dictionary of most of the earlier periods of English is still something we can only dream of, especially for the time between 1200 and 1900.

I would like to conclude with some remarks on possessive pronouns (see also Viereck 1996). The legend to map M20 of Viereck and Ramisch (1991) lists the responses to the question "How do we see?" and the legend to map M21 in Viereck – Ramisch (1997) those to the question "If you were asked, 'How did you know it was me talking outside when you couldn't see me?', you might reply: ...". As the legends show, possessives – not surprisingly – figure most prominently: with our eyes (Figure 5) and I knew your voice (Figure 6) respectively.¹² Yet, also the definite article occurs in scattered fashion: eight times both on the legends of Figure 5 and Figure 6. This is unusual in English, but normal in many other languages, such as German. Unlike English, German does not require possessives with inalienable possessions and personal belongings, cf. "Peter steckte die linke Hand in die Tasche" [Peter put the left hand in the pocket] versus English "Peter put his left hand in his pocket".

In English possessive pronouns can serve an anaphoric and a deictic function. Both functions can be differentiated by means of the following transformation. Quirk et al. (1985: 164) note:

Coreference between a subject and a noun phrase object blocks the passive correspondence. This constraint occurs with (a) reflexive pronouns ... and (c) possessive pronouns when coreferential to the subject:

(a) John could see \{Paul \_ \}

~ \{Paul \* \}

could be seen in the mirror...

(b) The woman shook \{my hand. \_ \}

~ \{My hand \* \}

was shaken by the woman.

In (c) the possessive could also refer to some antecedent not mentioned in the sentence. This interpretation must be ruled out here since we are concerned with coreference between subject and object. (a) shows that sentences with a reflexive pronoun behave in the same way as those with inalienable possessions.

Our two-frame sentences show this important point, too. In "I knew your voice", the possessive could be substituted by other possessives (deictic function), whereas this is not possible in "We see with our eyes". In the case of inalienable possessions, the possessive may only refer to an antecedent already mentioned with which it must agree in person and number. A pronoun thus restricted to a mere anaphoric function is in its essence no longer a pronoun and

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¹¹ In comparison with me and we, us is the only form without onset. Of the two forms [us] and [aus] the more difficult was dropped, perhaps immediately after the vowel shift (P. Gašiorowski’s observation). In agreement with the rules of fricative voicing in unstressed position the pronunciation [uz] survived well into the 20th century as [uz] or [az] in dialects; see Wright (1905: s.v. 'us' and § 409) and the Survey of English dialects.

¹² "The use of the personal pronoun, nominative or objective, instead of the possessive is common in many dialects..." (Wright 1905: § 411). The Survey of English dialects still attested us 19 times and we twice on map M20 – in contrast, however, to an overwhelming our (255 occurrences), including war, a mainly northern English variant. According to map M 21 the historical 2nd person singular thy was still very much embedded in the mid-20th century."
can therefore be dispensed with. It has lost its possessive function and is possessive only in form.

Quirk et al. (1985: 270) also point out that “with reference to parts of the body and following a preposition, the is often (my underlining) used instead of possesive pronouns my, your, her, their, ... etc.

Mary banged herself on the forehead.
They pulled her by the hair.
The policeman took the thief by the arm.”

Although the frame sentence “We see with our eyes” also contains a preposition, the definite article was elicited only very rarely. Thus, the question arises whether the substitution of the possessive pronoun by the definite article can also be accounted for in a different way. The examples above show that the possessive pronoun can be substituted when the antecedent to which it refers is the object of the sentence or, to put it differently, when the owner is not the subject.

When the possessive agrees in person and number with the subject of the sentence, it is not clear whether the pronoun acts in an anaphoric or a deictic function in English (see above, sentence (c)). This is not so in other languages where the deictic function is taken over by a possessive and the anaphoric function by a reflexive possessive. This is the case, for instance, in Polish.

The history of English shows that subject-referring possessive pronouns once were reflexive possessives, just as they were and are in other languages now. Old English had a reflexive possessive *sēn* that was inflected and almost always referred to the subject (in all genders, both singular and plural) of the sentence. It was used almost exclusively in poetry (Bauer 1963). Cf. “and him Hrogbald gemon to hofe sinum” (Beowulf, 1236) or “se inwidda ... dryhtguman sine drentce mid wine” (Judith, K 129). Besides, the fully declined possessive adjectives, derived from the genitive forms of the personal pronouns, were available in Old English. Apart from cases where the possessor was one other than the subject, in the 3rd person singular his, hit(e)re, and plural hit(e)ra were largely used instead of *sēn* to express reflexive possessive relationships. Cf. “to þam ælmhitegan gode þe me mid earm urmhte, her mid handum sinum” (Genesis, K 121) where variation between his and sin even occurred. Sin (together with mīn and þīn) inflected like strong adjectives whereas his remained uninflected in Old English. Both possibilities existed side by side and seemed to have been completely interchangeable in contrast to other languages, such as Latin (cf. suus vs. eius). As early as in late Old English *sin* had disappeared and his, etc., continued alone in this function. Of all the grammars I checked only Strang comments on the importance of this change and tries to explain it: “John took his book” would have distinct forms in O[ld] E[nglish] according to whether his = his own or another man’s. This useful distinction has had since

M[iddle] E[nglish] to be rendered in more long-winded ways; it is possibly one of the grammatical casualties of a period of bilingualism” (1970: 303).

Diachronic deliberations thus support the thesis of the reflexive character of the English possessive pronouns with reference to inalienable possessions and personal belongings.

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Orton, Harold


[1998] [Reissued London: Routledge].

Pinker, Hans Ernst
APPENDIX

Figure 1.

M 13: I.7.1 To weigh it

If you want to know how heavy a thing is, what do you do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>M</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>w</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>w</th>
<th>n</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>B</td>
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This table lists the phonemes used in the dialect.

- **M**: Middle
- **N**: Neutral
- **W**: West

Key:
- **C**: Common
- **O**: Option
- **X**: Extended

- **L**: Low
- **H**: High
- **A**: Average
- **R**: Rise

- **0**: Close
- **C**: Close
- **O**: Open

- **T**: Tongue
- **D**: Diphthong
- **W**: Wider

- **R**: Rounded
- **U**: Unrounded

- **Y**: Yod
- **Z**: Zephyr

- **B**: Back
- **F**: Front

- **W**: Wider
- **N**: Narrow
M 19: IX.8.2 Give it me

Jack wants to have Tommy's ball and says to him, not: Keep it, but: ...

M 14: V.7.20.2 tasted it

Before your wife brings you the broth, she is certain to have [gesticulate]...
### M 18: IX.7.7.3 she is

Which of you is English here? As for her you could answer...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>She is</th>
<th>She is (184)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bld</td>
<td>o her for</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lat</td>
<td>o her for</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chs</td>
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### M 20: VI.3.3 With our eyes

How do we see?

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<td>Lgr</td>
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**Note:** The diagram seems to be a language analysis chart, possibly related to the usage of pronouns in dialectal English, as indicated by the labels and symbols used.
M 21: VI.5.17 I knew your voice

If you were asked: How did you know it was me talking outside when you couldn't see me?, you might reply: ...
Definition, Usage and a list of Dialect Examples in common speech and literature. The language used by the people of a specific area, class, district or any other group of people. Dialects in American and British English. There have been several very unique dialects in literature in the past, out of which some have grown to be more dominant. Old and middle English had distinctive regional dialects. A.C. Baugh pointed out that in one place, at times, you can mark three dialectal regions in a single shire. Modern American English consists of dialects such as Eastern New England, Mid-southern, Inland Northern, Southern, General American North, Midland, New York, and Black English Vernacular. Function of Dialect.