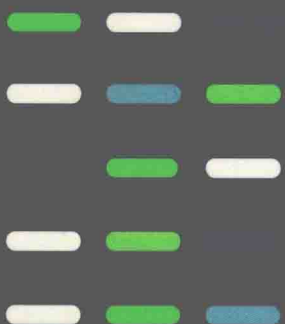


Personal pronouns in present-day English



Katie Wales

STUDIES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Personal pronouns in present-day English

KATIE WALES

Professor of English Language

Royal Holloway University of London



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This is the first comprehensive book-length analysis of personal pronouns in present-day English. Drawing on the Survey of English Usage corpus and the International Corpus of English, Katie Wales examines a wide range of discourse types and texts and of varieties of English around the world. Her approach is pragmatic and functional, rather than formal, and her concern is with speakers and writers and their uses of language in social, cultural and rhetorical contexts. The discussion is illustrated with numerous examples of the usage of personal pronouns and also of reflexives and possessives.

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Personal pronouns in present-day English

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and the late Sidney Greenbaum

Preface

Language, unlike mathematics, is not clearcut or precise. It is a natural human creation, and, like many other natural human creations, it is inherently messy.

(M.A.K. Halliday, *Language as social semiotic*, London: Edward Arnold, 1978: 203)

I have been obsessed with personal pronouns for nearly twenty years of my career, so this book represents something of an exorcism. The extent of my obsession is confirmed by the fact that it begins and ends with a pronoun. The reasons for my interest and enthusiasm I hope the book makes clear: the first full-length analysis of personal pronouns specifically in present-day English that I know of.

The treatment of pronouns in grammar-books, their traditional *loci* of description, tends to be selective, brief and often surprisingly prescriptive. One type of data, in fact, which I have drawn upon for comparison comprises two dozen twentieth-century influential or popular English grammar-books for native speakers and foreign learners of English. Time and again I discovered just how conservative they were, their 'rules' at odds with actual usage, direct descendants of their eighteenth-century forebears. In this context, apart from in the first chapter, I have tried not to use too many invented examples of my own: not only are they of limited value, but also too many erroneous ideas about pronominal usage have developed from them.

My data for empirical observation and analysis mostly comprises 'real' English as it is used. For, as Taylor (1993: 17) observes, even the most up-to-date and comprehensive grammars do not always reflect on-going changes in English. I have therefore drawn upon my own extensive files of examples of pronouns in use in the 1980s and 1990s up until January 1995; and also, in particular, the corpora of English usage housed at University College London. So I have drawn on the Survey of English Usage (SEU) corpus, comprising written and spoken standard English material from the late 1950s and early 1960s until the late 1980s; and the million-word corpus of British usage, part of the proposed International Corpus of English (ICE-GB), based on materials collected in 1990–1. The 'present-day' of my title, then, must be interpreted in

a dynamic rather than a static sense, referring to an English that is continually changing, but with my observations focussed on the usages of the most recent generation. However, I have used examples from the 1990s wherever possible, particularly in cases where a construction or speech-habit seems particularly 'trendy'. And 'present-day' provides pleasing alliteration.

I have also, it must be said, been keen to stress, where relevant, that present-day usages are often rooted in the past; and conversely, that the personal pronouns, traditionally labelled a 'closed' class of lexical items in the word-store of English, are not as stable and as non-resistant to influences as might appear.

I have also tried, wherever possible, to provide examples from a wide variety of Englishes, and not only standard English English. I am fully aware that discussion of pronouns, as of other grammatical features, has tended to focus on standard English English (and to a lesser extent American English) as the archetype, so that the unfortunate impression can be given to foreign learners of English that other varieties either do not exist or are not as significant, or are somehow 'deviant'. Many of the numerous tables in this book illustrate what I term 'non-standard' pronominal usages: not 'non-standard' in the sense of 'uneducated' (see Quirk *et al.*, 1985: 1.22), but of 'regional' or 'mainstream dialect': 'real' English, in a loaded sense for some dialectologists and sociolinguists. However, as I would also stress, it is not always easy to distinguish 'standard' from 'non-standard', especially in informal varieties, both of speech and of writing; there is more instability or fluctuation in standard English than some grammars would suggest. I have also tried to provide many illustrations from varieties of English beyond Britain, including 'new Englishes'; although, as I acknowledge in my Conclusion, there is much work as yet to be done on investigating the grammatical features of such varieties.

My approach is empirical rather than theoretical, although I have noted significant theoretical perspectives where they seemed most relevant (in chapter 2, on anaphora, for example). As even that chapter reveals, my approach is also pragmatic and functional rather than formal: what appears to be a 'syntactic' phenomenon cannot actually be satisfactorily explained syntactically. And here, as overall, I am as much concerned with the 'user' or speaker/writer as with 'use': hence inevitably concerned with social, political and rhetorical issues of culture, relationships and power. Users of English have always created their own 'systems' of pronouns or 'rules' of use for their own needs and strategies, and continue to do so, often in complete disregard of grammarians' notions of logic. Pronouns are as much a part of (active) language behaviour as they are of (stative) grammar.

Far too many interesting connotations and rhetorical effects in fact have been ignored by grammarians altogether, who tend to assume in any case that pronouns are mono-valent in meaning. Alternatively, 'variant' uses have been buried in footnotes, which are yet significant for the learner of English, for example. In general, I hope to convey from my book as a whole a strong,

Bakhtinian impression of the regional, social, generic, stylistic and situational diversity of present-day English pronominal usage, which a conventional grammar-book quite fails to achieve.

The first chapter introduces basic concepts and definitions of the personal pronouns, many of which are elaborated in the later chapters. I have found myself in complete agreement with Michael (1970: 72), who argues that the traditional category of pronoun is an 'inconsistent combination' of what appear to be 'unrelated functions', held together virtually by its name. I have included possessives and reflexives in the scope of my study, discussing these particularly in chapter 7. Chapters 2 and 3 distinguish between third person, on the one hand, and first and second person ('inter-personal') pronouns, on the other, including *one*. Chapter 2 is largely concerned with textual relations and discourse processing, lending support to a model of co-reference based on a 'world' of shared and mutual knowledge between speaker and hearer. Chapter 3 is much concerned with discourse functions and strategies in the light of the complex social relationships between speakers and addressees.

Chapter 4 might at first glance appear to be the most traditional chapter, in the sense that it is concerned with formal issues of 'case'; but my emphasis is very much on contemporary usage both within and beyond the British Isles, on the difference between precept and practice, and on sociolinguistic issues of prestige and stigma.

Chapters 5 and 6 are similar to the extent that they both raise questions about the much-debated topics of 'gender' and 'sexism'; but chapter 5 provides a detailed and up-to-date account of the so-called 'generic *he*' debate and of the pronominal alternatives; and chapter 6 an extensive discussion and illustration of the whole question of the animateness hierarchy and 'personification', in relation to pronoun usage.

It is now clearly stated in the National Curriculum for England and Wales that pupils between the ages of five and sixteen years should 'recognise that . . . the grammatical features that distinguish standard English [*sic*] include how pronouns . . . should be used' (1995: 3). It is to be hoped that this volume is of use to those teachers who seek to instruct their pupils on this far from simple, yet fascinating, subject; and not only in England and Wales, but wherever in the world English is taught.

Without the considerable benefit of a year's Senior Research Fellowship from the British Academy/Leverhulme Trust, for the academic year 1992-3, this book would still be in progress. I am also deeply indebted to Sidney Greenbaum, the series editor, for his helpful comments on each chapter. His death while the book was at final proofs stage came as a great shock. To Sid I owe a particularly personal connotation of the pronoun *it* ('How's *it* going?'). Many other colleagues, friends and students have helped me over the last few years, sometimes unwittingly: notably Wolf-Dietrich Bald, Joyce Bianconi, David Bovey, Robert Burchfield, Paul Coggle, Xavier Dekeyser, Ninah Devons, Martin Dodsworth, Leslie Dunkling, Monika Fludernik, Deidre

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Abbreviations and symbols

acc.	accusative case (Old English)
adj.	adjective
Afr. Eng.	African English
Barns.	Barnsley dialect
BEV	Black English Vernacular
Bl. Count.	Black Country English
Bl. Eng.	Black English
Celt./Gael.	Celtic English/Gaelic English
Cock.	Cockney dialect
dat.	dative case (Old English)
Dubl.	Dublin English
E. Angl.	East Anglian dialect
ego.	egocentric
EME	Early Middle English
fem.	feminine gender
Fiji	Fiji English
GB theory	Government and Binding theory
gen.	genitive case
Gull.	Gullah
Guy.	Guyanese
Hib. Eng.	Hiberno-English
ICE-GB	International Corpus of English (Great Britain corpus)
instr.	instrumental case (Old English)
Jam. Cr.	Jamaican Creole
Jam. Eng.	Jamaican English
Lancs.	Lancashire dialect
<i>LDEL</i>	<i>The Longman dictionary of English language and culture</i> (London: Longman, 1992)
Lond. Jam.	London Jamaican English

xvi Abbreviations and symbols

<i>LRB</i>	<i>The London Review of Books</i>
Mal. Eng.	Malay English
masc.	masculine gender
ME	Middle English
Mids.	Midland dialects of English
Monts.	Montserrat English
neut.	neuter gender
Newf.	Newfoundland English
Nig. Pig.	Nigerian Pigin English
nom.	nominative case (Old English)
non-Nt.	non-northern dialects of English
non-stand.	non-standard dialects of English
Nt.	northern
Nt. Eng.	Northern English
NW Mids.	North-west Midland dialects of English
obj.	objective case
<i>OCEL</i>	<i>The Oxford Companion to the English Language</i> , ed. T. McArthur. (Oxford University Press, 1992)
OE	Old English
<i>OED</i>	<i>The Oxford English Dictionary</i>
Pap. Pig.	Papuan Pigin
pl.	plural
poss.	possessive
PP	personal pronoun
prep. C	prepositional complement
pres.	present tense
Rast.	Rastafarian English
reg.	regional varieties of British English
RP	Received Pronunciation
Sam. Pig.	Samoan Pigin
Sam. Pl. Eng.	Samoan Plantation English
Scot. Eng.	Scottish English
SEU	The Survey of English Usage
Shet.	Shetland English
sg.	singular
Som.	Somerset dialect
St. Am. Eng.	Southern American English (USA)
subj.	subjective case
SW	South-west dialects of English
TG	Transformational (generative) grammar
Tok. Pis.	Tok Pisin
Tynes.	Tyneside dialect
voc.	vocative
W. Afr. Pig.	West African Pigin

W. Mids.	West Midland dialect
W. Yorks.	West (Riding of) Yorkshire dialect
Wel. bord.	Welsh border dialect
Wel. Eng.	Welsh English
Yorks.	Yorkshire dialect
1PP	first person pronoun
2PP	second person pronoun
3PP	third person pronoun
< >	enclose graphic symbols (letters of alphabet)
/ /	enclose phonemic symbols
∅	zero

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1 Personal pronouns: definitions and descriptions

Haiku, you ku, he
She, or it kus, we ku, you
Ku, they ku. Thang ku.

(Ted Hipple, *The traditional grammarian as poet*)

1.1 Definitions

Definitions of the pronoun by English grammarians have changed little since the sixteenth century, when the term first appeared in English. Even then, the term and its definitions were based on Latin, and ultimately Greek sources: Latin *pro-nomen*, Greek *anto-numia* ‘standing for a noun’. Michael (1970) traces the word-class as a separate part of speech back to Dionysius Thrax in the second century BC. In those modern grammar books for both native and foreign speakers of English, where the pronoun is actually defined at all, a definition of it as standing for a noun or as a ‘substitute for a noun’ is by far the most popular type (see Swan 1980); or, at least, as a substitute for a noun or noun phrase (NP) (see Leech and Svartvik 1975; Young 1984; Freeborn 1987; Crystal 1988; Greenbaum 1991; McArthur 1992). Lees and Klima (1969: 145) approve whole-heartedly of such an ‘etymological’ definition, which indeed has proved influential in generative grammars and related theories, as we shall see in chapter 2.

As we shall also see in greater detail in chapter 2, the notion of ‘substitution’ has played an important role in the discussion of personal pronouns generally, particularly the third person pronoun (henceforth 3PP). Indeed, it may be argued that for various (related and unrelated) reasons, the 3PP is often seen as the ‘prototypical’ personal pronoun in contrast to the first and second (henceforth 1PP and 2PP); just as the personal pronoun itself is seen as the ‘prototypical’ pronoun in contrast to the seven other subclasses of pronouns traditionally distinguished (possessive, reflexive, reciprocal, relative, interrogative, demonstrative, indefinite).¹

In many definitions, the conditions for ‘substitution’ are not specified. So the pronoun is said to stand for a noun ‘already mentioned’ (Robertson 1959; *OED*); or ‘replace an earlier’ NP (Leech and Svartvik 1975), but it is not clear whether a sentence provides the co-text or a text. With such definitions, the assumption is that the pronoun (implicitly and normally the 3PP) has