

Morphological φ -agreement in English: Singular *they* and relative *who*

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Canadian Linguistic Association • UBC • June 2019

1 A paradigm and a puzzle

1.1 What does *were* mean?

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
1st	(I) <i>was</i>	(we) <i>were</i>
2nd	(you) <i>were</i>	(you) <i>were</i>
3rd	(she/he/it) <i>was</i>	(they) <i>were</i>

Table 1: The past-tense paradigm of English BE (to be amended)

Theoretical assumptions:

- **Late insertion:** Syntactic trees are built from features, not words. Vocabulary items (VIs) are inserted to spell out those features (Halle & Marantz 1993).
- **Agree:** Features of the subject are copied onto the (auxiliary) verb. These features can then contribute to determining how the verb is spelled out.



Figure 1: Vocabulary items in Table 1

1.2 Singular *they*

“It has long been acknowledged by linguists, grammarians, and the public at large that the English language would benefit from an epicene pronoun: a singular pronoun that could refer to known human individuals without having to specify a binary gender. Currently, the leading contender for this role is *they*”
(Konnelly & Cowper 2019: 1)

1.2.1 As a bound variable

- (1) *And this was specially to be noted in the children of the said William and Marie, there was never **any of them**_i did marry till **they**_i were at leste 34 yers of age.*
(Simon Forman, *Autobiography*, 1600)
- (2) *Mrs. Lynde says she always feels shocked when she hears of **any one**_i; ever having been naughty, no matter how small **they**_i were.*
(L. M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*, 1908)

1.2.2 With a specific referent

- (3) *my friend_i; said they_i; were going as 'Sexy Pennywise' for halloween and i was like BISH HE'S ALREADY SEXY!!*
(Connie Glynn, Twitter, 23 October 2017)
- (4) *There was one part of the documentary where Rae Spoon_i was concerned for themself_i; when they_i were traveling in the Midwest in the U.S.*
(Ewan Duarte, "7 trans films from the summer film festival circuit that you must see," *Original Plumbing*, August 2014)
- (5) % *Sir Paul_i; has always played their_i; guitar left-handed.*
(Konnolly & Cowper 2019: 9; cf. McConnell-Ginet 2014: 22)

"Even singular uses of *they* fail to trigger third person singular agreement forms on the finite verb, instead triggering the default 'plural' forms."
(Bjorkman 2017: 7, fn. 11)

1.3 The real paradigm

			SINGULAR	PLURAL
1st			(I) <i>was</i>	(we) <i>were</i>
2nd			(you) <i>were</i>	(you) <i>were</i>
3rd	INAN.		(it) <i>was</i>	} (they) <i>were</i>
3rd	ANIM.		(they) <i>were</i>	
3rd	ANIM.	FEM.	(she) <i>was</i>	
3rd	ANIM.	MASC.	(he) <i>was</i>	

Table 2: The past-tense paradigm of English BE (revised)

Neither *was* nor *were* seems to correspond to a natural class:

was \Leftrightarrow singular AND non-second AND (inanimate OR feminine OR masculine)

were \Leftrightarrow plural OR second OR (animate AND NOT(feminine OR masculine))

But there is a pattern here.

- | | | | | | |
|-----|----|-------------------------------|-----|----|-------------------------------|
| (6) | a. | (s)he <i>was</i> | (7) | a. | [†] thou <i>wast</i> |
| | b. | they <i>were</i> | | b. | you <i>were</i> |
| | c. | *they <i>was</i> [†] | | c. | *you <i>wast</i> |

2 Solving the puzzle

2.1 Morphological agreement

- Bobaljik (2006): Agreement can depend on morphological, rather than syntactic, properties of arguments. E.g., case in Icelandic.
- The default word order is SVO, and subjects normally have nominative case.

1. Setting aside varieties of English in which 'singular' agreement has generalized in various ways (see, e.g., Bismark 2010 for a survey).

- (8) *Við fór-um í skól-ann.*
 we.NOM.PL went-1PL to school-the.ACC.SG
 ‘We went to the school.’ (Höskuldur Thráinsson 2007: 178)

- But some verbs assign quirky case to their subjects.

- (9) *Mér hafa alltaf leiðst þessir kjölturakkar.*
 me.DAT.SG have.3PL always bored these poodles.NOM.PL
 ‘I have always found these poodles boring.’ (Höskuldur Thráinsson 2007: 160)

- (Auxiliary) verbs agree with whichever argument has nominative case—not necessarily the subject.²
- Bobaljik’s (2006) proposal: Agreement happens after morphological case assignment.
- What the verb agrees with is determined by a hierarchy adapted from Moravcsik (1974, 1978):
 Unmarked case > Dependent case > Lexical/oblique case

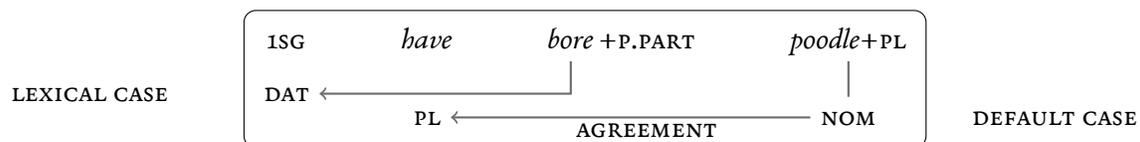


Figure 2: Morphological agreement in Icelandic

2.2 Proposal

Proposal:

- Agreement with English subject pronouns depends on their spell-out.
- Specifically, verbs agree only with features that are overtly realized on their subjects.

Caveats:

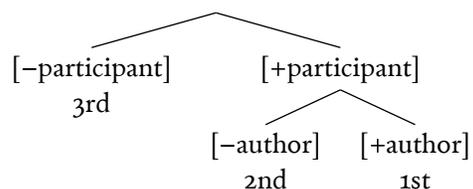
- This can’t be universal—some languages have rich agreement with null subjects.
- Why only pronouns? We’ll come back to this.

2.3 Assumptions about features

2.3.1 Contrastive features

Binary features (would also work with only the + values marked):

- Person: (Cowper & Hall 2019, adapted from Harbour 2016)



2. How do we know *mér* is really the subject in (9)? See appendix A.

- Number: (adapted from Harley & Ritter 2002; Harbour 2014)
 - [+minimal] singular
 - [-minimal] plural
- Animacy: [\pm inanimate]

2.3.2 Modifier features

Adjunct modifier features are monovalent—but not privative (Wiltschko 2008). They are optional, and their absence is non-contrastive.

- Gender: (Konnely & Cowper 2019; Bjorkman 2017)
 - *Feminine* (on *she, her, hers*)
 - *Masculine* (on *he, him, his*)
- Register: (Cowper & Hall 2003)
 - *Archaic* (on *thou, thee, thy, thine, art, wast, wert, ...*)

2.4 Spelling it out: *They_{SG} were*

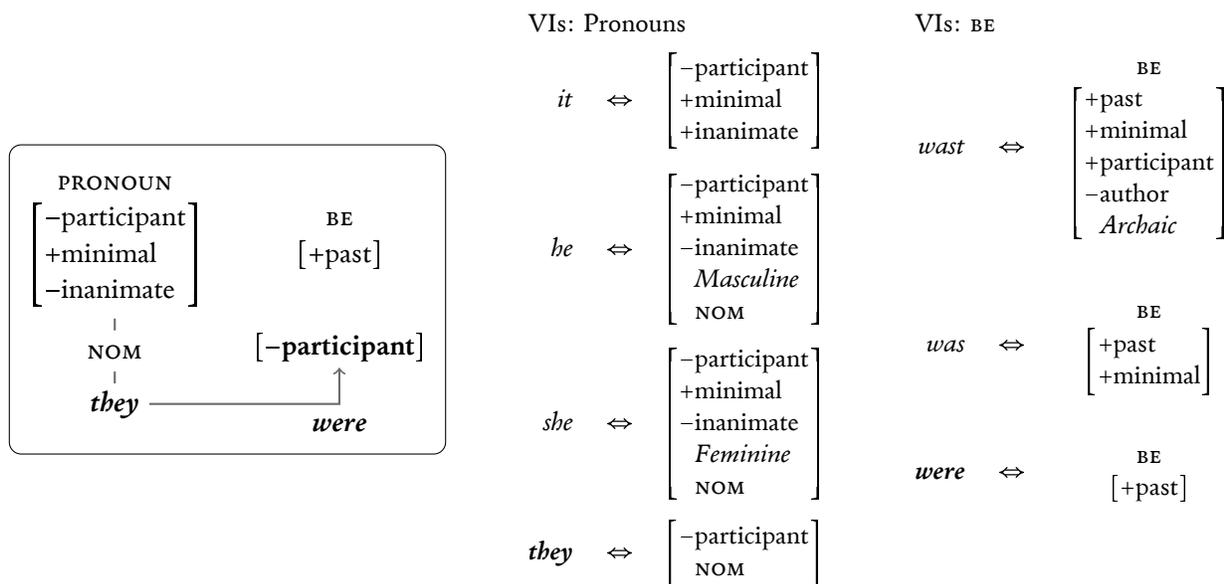


Figure 3: Deriving *they_{SG} were*

(See appendix B for *you_{SG} were*.)

2.5 What about semantic agreement?

- Agreement with meaning rather than form happens:

(10) ...*the whole family were together in the same room...*

(Diary of Sir Dudley Ryder, 1716)

- But not with pronouns:

(4') **Rae Spoon_i was concerned for herself_i; when they_i was travelling...*

- And only for number, not person:

(11) * $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{Muggins here} \\ \text{Yours truly} \end{array} \right\} \text{am going to have to do all the work.}$

2.6 Pronouns vs. other nominals

- As proposed above, agreement with pronouns depends on features of VIs.
- Number 'agreement' with other nominal phrases is (at least sometimes) semantic, allowing for pluringulars (den Dikken 2001) and transparency:

(12) ...*the committee were generally agreed that some form of oath should be prescribed...*

(Debates and Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Illinois, 1870)

(13) a. *A number of werewolves were present.*

b. *The number of werewolves was increasing.*

- The difference could be based on a difference in syntactic category: Cowper & Hall (2009) propose that pronouns are φ Ps, as opposed to DPs.

3 Consequences for *who*

3.1 A different pattern

Unlike personal pronouns, relative *who* consistently shows semantic number agreement, and interrogative *who* does so for some speakers as well:

(14) Relative: Semantic agreement

a. *the person who was singing*

b. *the people who were singing*

c. *the group who $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{was} \\ \text{were} \end{array} \right\}$ singing*

(15) Interrogative: Agreement or invariant sg.

a. *Who was singing?*

b. % *Who were singing?*

c. *Who was besieging the castle?*

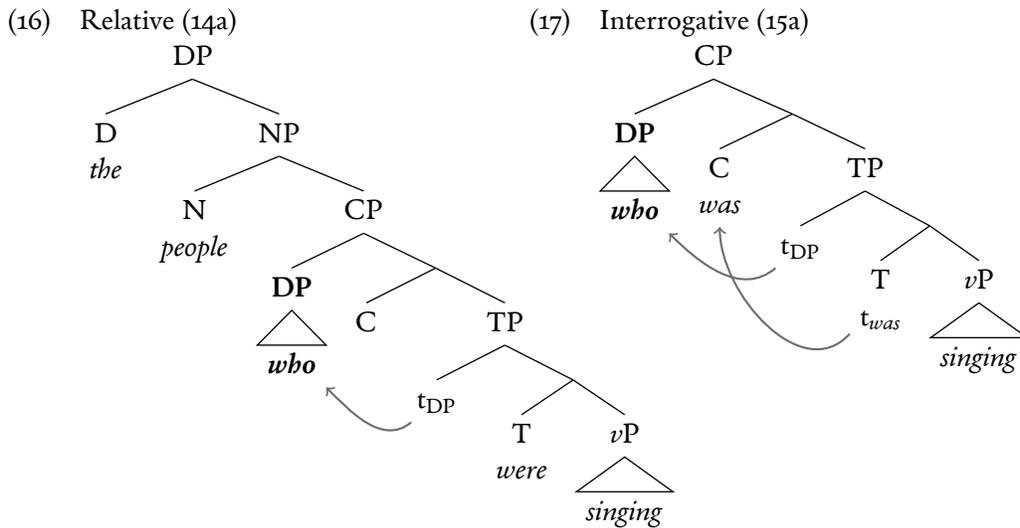
d. % *Who were besieging the castle?*

e. % *Who all was throwing stones in Guildhall Square?*

(McCloskey 2000: 78)

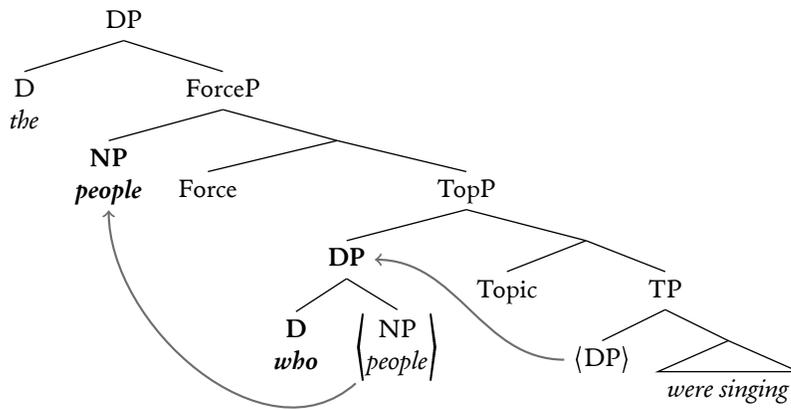
3.2 The promotion structure

In the traditional analysis, *who* is a pronoun in both uses.



But Kayne (1994) and Bianchi (1999) (among others) have independently proposed that the head noun in an NP like (14a) originates inside the relative clause. (Why? App. E)

(18) Revised structure for (14a), based on Bianchi (1999)



3.3 What about interrogative *who*?

For speakers who accept (15b) and (15d), *who* seems to work the same way as *which*.

- (19) a. [**Which (wine)**] *was more popular, the red (wine) or the white (one)?*
- b. [**Which (wines)**] *were more popular, the red (wines) or the white (ones)?*



For other speakers, interrogative *who* shows invariant agreement, like other pronouns.

But it's singular agreement, and we need the plural verb forms to be the default when agreeing with pronouns that don't spell out number (*you, they*).

So these speakers' interrogative *who* is either:

- a pronoun that spells out [+minimal] (non-monosemous)
- or a determiner that can combine with \emptyset_{SG} but not \emptyset_{PL} (arbitrary)

4 Conclusions

- Singular *they* is part of an agreement paradigm that can't be explained with ordinary underspecification.
- Instead, agreement depends on which features a pronominal subject spells out.
- This in turn provides novel independent evidence for the promotion analysis of relative *who*.

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to:

- Elizabeth Cowper
- Lex Konnelly
- Bronwyn Bjorkman
- audiences at MoMOT and SMU

Appendices

A How do we know Icelandic quirky subjects are subjects?

More data from Höskuldur Thráinsson (2007: 164):

- (21) *Stelpunum leiddist í skólanum og fóru heim.*
 girls.the.DAT bored in school.the and went home
 ‘The girls were bored in school and went home.’
- (22) *Stelpurnar fóru í skólann en leiddist þar.*
 girls.the.NOM went to school but bored there
 ‘The girls went to school but were bored there.’

A single DP can be the subject of two conjoined verb phrases even if one verb assigns quirky dative and the other doesn’t. The morphological case on the subject is determined by the first verb.

F The default value for number

What is the default number in English?

In favour of plural as the default:

- The pronouns *you* and *they*, which don't express number, show plural agreement:

- (29) a. *They were my housemate for a couple of years.*
 b. *You were the first person I met.*

- Singular is morphologically marked on verbs:

- (30) *My sister likes phonology.*

- We get 'plural' morphology when $n \neq 1$, not just when $n > 1$:

- (31) a. *No chairs are available.* (Sauerland et al. 2005)
 b. *The average family has 0.8 children.*

In favour of singular as the default:

- Interrogative *who* defaults to singular agreement for speakers with no number contrast:

- (32) *Who was gathering in the courtyard?*

- Plural is morphologically marked on nouns:

- (33) *My students like phonology.*

- Singular DPs can have plural semantic agreement, but not vice versa.

- (34) a. *The jury* $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \textit{was} \\ \textit{were} \end{array} \right\}$ *still deliberating.*
 b. *The jurors* $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \textit{*was} \\ \textit{were} \end{array} \right\}$ *still deliberating.*