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

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Saint Mary's University

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Outline

1. A paradigm and a puzzle
   - What does *were* mean?
   - Singular *they*
     - As a bound variable
     - With a specific referent
   - The real paradigm
2. Solving the puzzle
   - Morphological agreement
   - Proposal
   - Assumptions about features
     - Contrastive features
     - Modifier features
   - Spelling it out: $They_{SG}$ *were*
   - What about semantic agreement?
   - Pronouns *vs.* other nominals
3. Consequences for *who*
   - A different pattern
   - The promotion structure
   - What about interrogative *who*?
4. Conclusions

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- 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*.

I A paradigm and a puzzle

IA

A paradigm and a puzzle

↪ What does *were* mean?

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
1st	(I) *was*	(we) *were*
2nd	(you) *were*	(you) *were*
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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).

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- 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.

A paradigm and a puzzle

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was ⇔ BE [+past, +minimal, −addressee]

were ⇔ BE [+past]

A paradigm and a puzzle

↪ 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)

A paradigm and a puzzle

(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)

A paradigm and a puzzle

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(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)

A paradigm and a puzzle

(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)

A paradigm and a puzzle

↪ Singular *they* ▸ With a specific referent

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(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.*

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(5) % *Sir Paul$_i$ has always played their$_i$ guitar left-handed.*

(Konnelly & Cowper 2019: 9; cf. McConnell-Ginet 2014: 22)

A paradigm and a puzzle

↪ Singular *they*

"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)

A paradigm and a puzzle

↪ The real paradigm

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

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But there is a pattern here.

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

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A paradigm and a puzzle

(6) a. *(s)he was*
b. *they were*
c. * *they was*[1]

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

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- The default word order is SVO, and subjects normally have nominative case.

(8) *Við* *fór-um* *í* *skól-ann.*
we.NOM.PL went-1PL to school-the.ACC.SG
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- 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)

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Appendix A: How do we know *mér* is really the subject in (9)?

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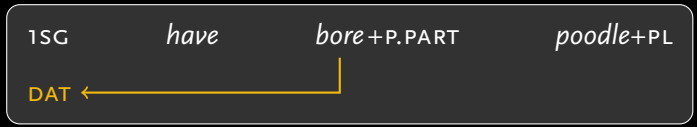

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DEFAULT CASE	DAT			NOM

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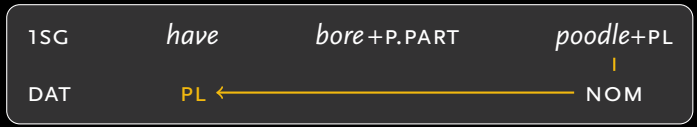

2B Solving the puzzle

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- This can't be universal—some languages have rich agreement with null subjects.

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- Specifically, verbs agree only with features that are overtly realized on their subjects.

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- Why only pronouns? We'll come back to this.

2C Solving the puzzle

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

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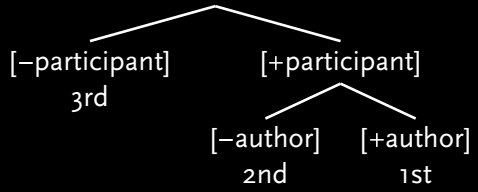
- Person: (Cowper & Hall 2019, adapted from Harbour 2016)



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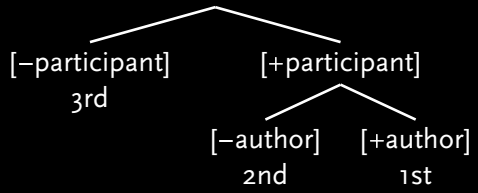

- Number: (adapted from Harley & Ritter 2002; Harbour 2014)

  [+minimal] singular
  [–minimal] plural

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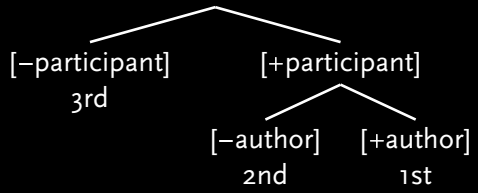

- Number: (adapted from Harley & Ritter 2002; Harbour 2014)
  - [+minimal] singular
  - [−minimal] plural
- Animacy: [±inanimate]

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

Solving the puzzle

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- Gender: (Konnelly & Cowper 2019; Bjorkman 2017)
  - *Feminine* (on *she, her, hers*)
  - *Masculine* (on *he, him, his*)

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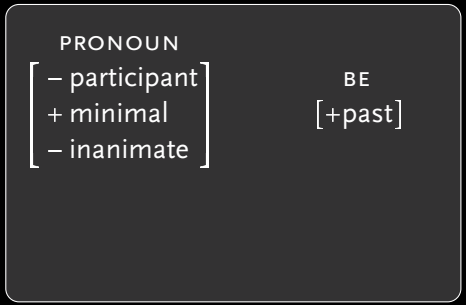
- Gender: (Konnelly & Cowper 2019; Bjorkman 2017)
  - *Feminine* (on *she, her, hers*)
  - *Masculine* (on *he, him, his*)

- Register: (Cowper & Hall 2003)
  - *Archaic* (on *thou, thee, thy, thine, art, wast, wert, ...*)

2D Solving the puzzle

↪ Spelling it out: *They*$_{SG}$ *were*



2D Solving the puzzle

↪ Spelling it out: *They*$_{SG}$ *were*

DEFAULT CASE

PRONOUN

[– participant
+ minimal
– inanimate]

NOM

BE

[+past]

2D Solving the puzzle

↪ Spelling it out: *They*$_{SG}$ *were*

VOCABULARY INSERTION

PRONOUN
[– participant
+ minimal
– inanimate]

NOM

BE
[+past]

Vocabulary Items

it ⇔ [–participant, +minimal, +inanimate]

he ⇔ [–participant, +minimal, –inanimate, *Masculine*, NOM]

she ⇔ [–participant, +minimal, –inanimate, *Feminine*, NOM]

they ⇔ [–participant, NOM]

2D Solving the puzzle

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they ⇔ [–participant, NOM]

2D Solving the puzzle

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NOM

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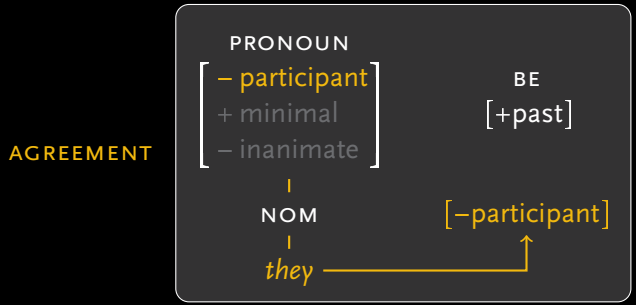

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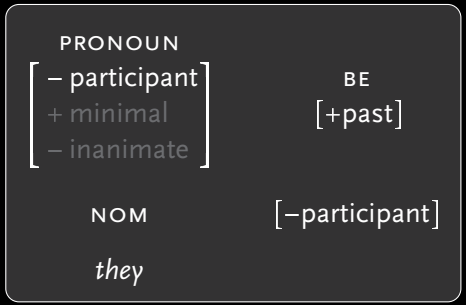

Vocabulary Items

wast ⇔ BE [+past, +minimal, +participant, –author, *Archaic*]

was ⇔ BE [+past, +minimal]

were ⇔ BE [+past]

2D Solving the puzzle

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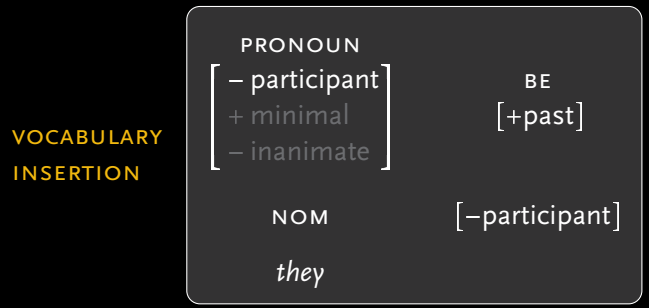

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VOCABULARY INSERTION

PRONOUN
[– participant
+ minimal
– inanimate]

BE
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NOM
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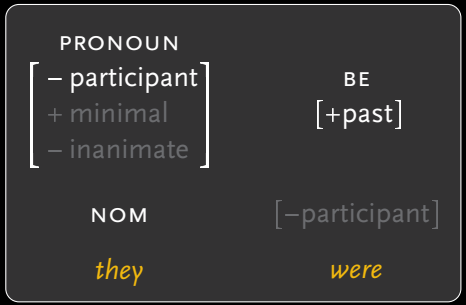

(See appendix B for *you were*.)

2E Solving the puzzle

↪ 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)

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- But not with pronouns:

  (4′) **Rae Spoon$_i$ was concerned for themself$_i$ when they$_i$ was travelling...*

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  (4′) **Rae Spoon$_i$ was concerned for themself$_i$ when they$_i$ was travelling...*

- And only for number, not person:

  (11) * { *Muggins here* / *Yours truly* } *am going to have to do all the work.*

2F Solving the puzzle

↪ Pronouns *vs.* other nominals

- As proposed above, agreement with pronouns depends on features of VIs.

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b. *The number of werewolves was increasing.*

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

3A Consequences for *who*

↪ 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:

a. *the person who was singing*

(15) Interrogative:

a. *Who was singing?*

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(McCloskey 2000: 78)

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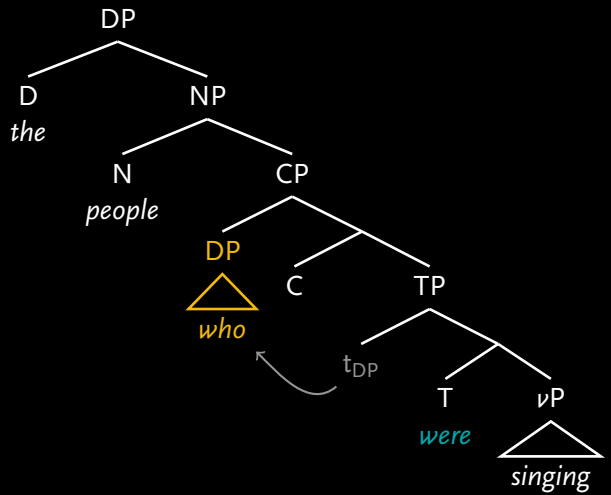

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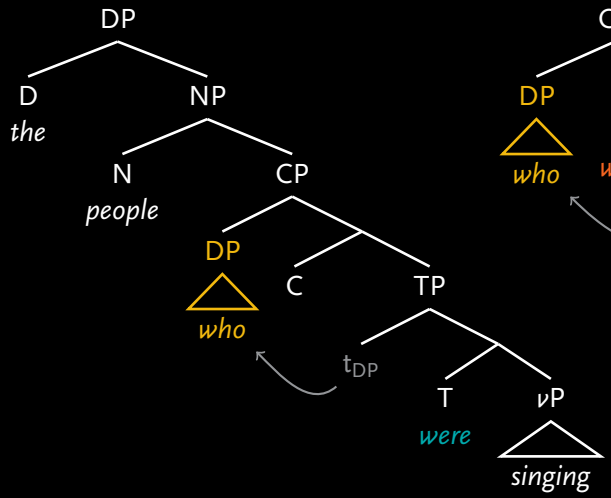
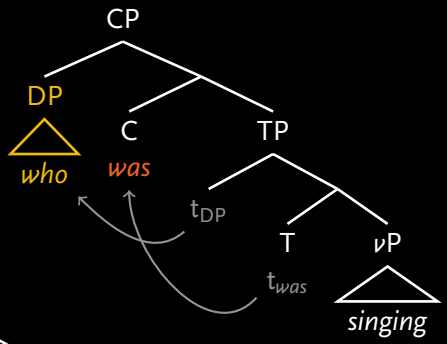


(17) Interrogative (15a)



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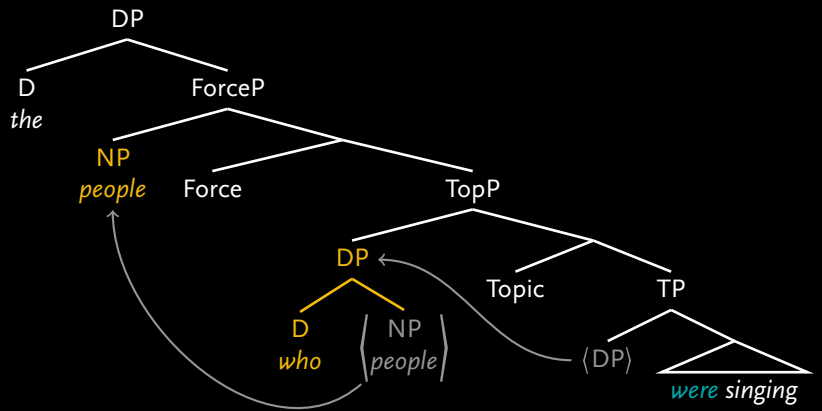
(18) Revised structure for (14b), based on Bianchi (1999)



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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)?*

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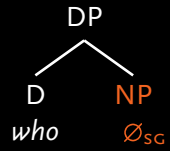
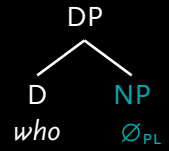


b.



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So these speakers' interrogative *who* is either:

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

Appendices

- How do we know Icelandic quirky subjects are subjects?
- Spelling it out: *You*$_{SG}$ *were*
- Person agreement with relative *who*
- Does *themself* express number?
- What else does the raising analysis have going for it?
- The default value for number

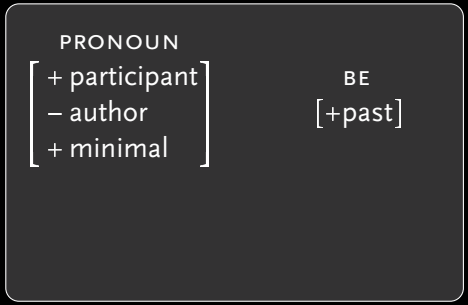
How do we know Icelandic quirky subjects are subjects?

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.'

Spelling it out: *You*$_{SG}$ *were*



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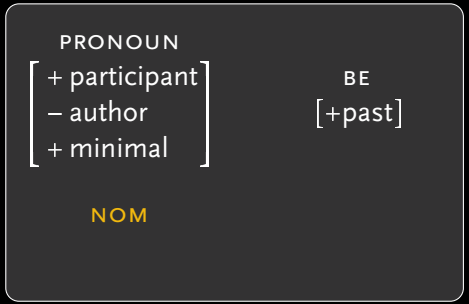
DEFAULT CASE



Spelling it out: *You*$_{SG}$ *were*

VOCABULARY INSERTION

PRONOUN
[+ participant
– author
+ minimal]

NOM

BE
[+past]

Vocabulary Items

thou ⇔ [+participant, –author, +minimal, *Archaic*, NOM]

I ⇔ [+participant, +author, +minimal, NOM]

you ⇔ [+participant, –author]

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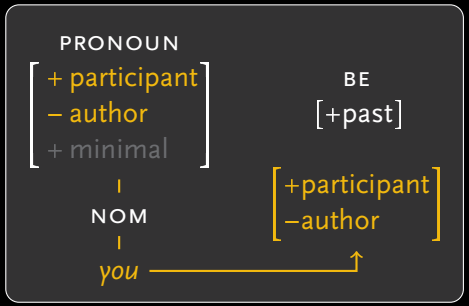

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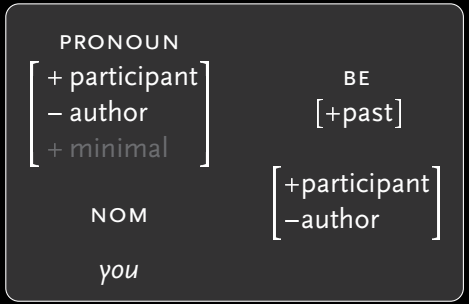


Vocabulary Items

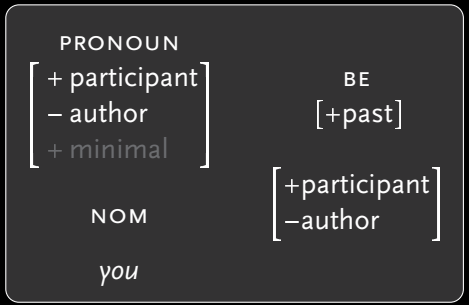
wast ⇔ BE [+past, +minimal, +participant, –author, *Archaic*]

was ⇔ BE [+past, +minimal]

were ⇔ BE [+past]

Spelling it out: *You*$_{SG}$ *were*

VOCABULARY INSERTION



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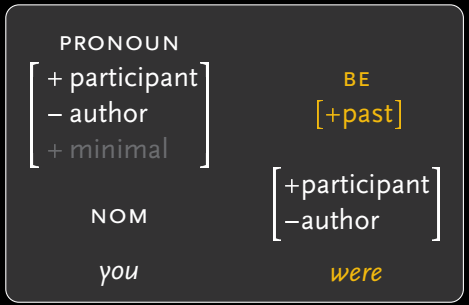

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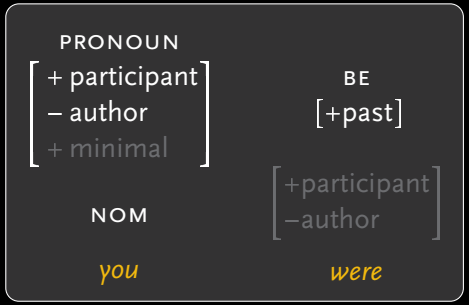

Person agreement with relative *who*

(23) *How then shall Pharaoh hear me, who am of uncircumcised lips?*

(King James Bible, Exodus 6:12)

(24) *I who am blind can give one hint to those who see.*

(Helen Keller, "Three Days to See," *The Atlantic,* 1933)

(25) *O my only and sovereign Lady, who art the sole consolation that I receive from God…*

(A.M. de Liguori, "Prayer of Saint Germanus," *The Glories of Mary,* tr. R.A. Coffin, 1868)

Does *themself* express number?

(26) *He questioned softly "Why I failed"?*
"For Beauty", I replied —
"And I — for Truth — Themself are One —
We Brethren, are", He said —

(Emily Dickinson, "I died for Beauty — but was scarce," 1862)

What else does the raising analysis have going for it?

Bianchi (1999: 50), citing Vergnaud (1974): French *prendre part* has the idiomatic reading 'take part' / 'participate' (in sth.) only if the noun *part* is the underlying object of the verb *prendre*.

(27) *Il décrit dans son livre* [*la part qu' il a prise* *t* *aux travaux du 9ème congrès*].
he describes in his book the part that he has taken in.the workings of.the ninth conference
'In his book he describes his participation in the ninth conference.'

(28) * *Il a pris aux travaux du 9ème congrès* [*la part qu' il décrit* *t* *dans son livre*].
he has taken in.the workings of.the ninth conference the part that he describes in his book
Intended: 'He played in the ninth conference the role that he describes in his book.'

The default value for number

What is the default number in English?

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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.*

The default value for number

What is the default number in English? 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* {*was* / *were*} *still deliberating.*

  b. *The jurors* {**was* / *were*} *still deliberating.*

Acknowledgements

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

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