"Tell *us*$_{SG}$ about it!": A deficient indexical in British English

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1. Introduction

In British English, the oblique first person plural pronoun *us* can be used for first person singular reference. This is known as *singular "us"* (*us*$_{SG}$).[1] An example of *us*$_{SG}$ is given in (1), an exchange between two speakers about the shape of charging cable ports.

(1) A: There's nowt worse than when they change a phone charger.
B: Tell ***us***$_{SG}$ about it! I had to succumb you know. Well, you know because you ordered it for ***us***$_{SG}$.

This substituting of *us* for *me* is distributionally widespread; it appears in imperatives (2a), matrix and embedded declaratives (2b)-(2c), small clauses (2d), *wh*-questions (2e) and polar questions (2f). Moreover, as (1) also shows, it can be the complement of a preposition (2g).[2]

(2) a. Give ***us***$_{SG}$ one minute.
b. I can tuck my hair into it [a hat] and it'll protect ***us***$_{SG}$ from the sun.
c. I know you love ***us***$_{SG}$. You don't have to tell ***us***$_{SG}$ before you get on a plane.
d. It makes ***us***$_{SG}$ wanna die.
e. Where are they spitting on ***us***$_{SG}$?
f. Can you do ***us***$_{SG}$ another thing as well?
g. It used to happen to ***us***$_{SG}$ when I was on The One Show now and then . . .

One previously noted restriction on *us*$_{SG}$ is that it is phonologically deficient (Wright 1905), i.e., cannot bear stress (3a). In addition, *us*$_{SG}$ cannot be coordinated (3b), modified (3c), left-discloated (3d), occur in isolation (3e) or appear after verb particle clusters (3f), making *us*$_{SG}$ a prototypical *weak* pronoun (Cardinaletti & Starke 1994, 1999).

(3) a. *Give **US**$_{SG}$ one minute.
b. *I know you love {***us***$_{SG}$ and Penelope} / {Penelope and ***us***$_{SG}$ }.
c. *You could have given yesterday's ***us***$_{SG}$ a fiver for it, but now I want ten!
d. *****us***$_{SG}$, ask for more than a fiver for it? Never!
e. Q: Who brought cookies? A: *****us***$_{SG}$.
f. Ted threw (*us*$_{SG}$) out (*****us***$_{SG}$).

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[1] According to Upton et al. (1994), *us*$_{SG}$ is attested in all English counties except for Rutland and Berkshire. It is also found in Scotland (Miller 1993: 108) and Ireland (Kortmann 2004: 1096). For descriptions of *us*$_{SG}$ in other regional dialects see e.g., Beal 2004, Anderwald 2004.

[2] Examples (1) and (2a–2g) come from the podcast *Shagged Married Annoyed*. The two hosts are from South Shields, Tyneside.

This paper establishes two new empirical generalizations about *us*$_{SG}$ that have not been noted in the literature. First, that *us*$_{SG}$ is unacceptable in dream reports where it is locally c-commanded by *I* (4). Second, that it lacks a bound variable reading (5).

(4) I dreamed that I was Brigitte Bardot and I kissed {**me** / ***us**$_{SG}$*}

(5) Only I got a question that made {**me** / ***us**$_{SG}$*} feel stupid
= nobody else got a question that made them feel stupid

I offer a two-pronged analysis of *us*$_{SG}$ to capture these facts. First, I propose that *us*$_{SG}$ is a clitic; specifically, a phi (ϕ) head with deficient featural specification—it bears person [π] features but not number [#] features (6). The ϕ-clitic is thus number neutral, allowing both singular and plural readings (see Section 2). Second, following Snell (2007), I claim that *us*$_{SG}$ receives unambigiously singular reference because it is a *polite pronoun* that serves to establish solidarity with an interlocutor.

(6) [$_{\phi}$ π:1]

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the background assumptions I make regarding deficient pronouns, and shows how the structure in (6) fits into a broader typology of pronominal deficiency. Section 3 shows how this analysis captures the new empirical facts. In Section 4 I turn to the pragmatic function of *us*$_{SG}$ as a polite pronoun. Section 5 concludes.

2. Background assumptions

Above I showed that *us*$_{SG}$ possesses prosodic and syntactic properties that characterize it as a *weak* (i.e., deficient) pronoun. Since the influential work of Cardinaletti & Starke (1994, 1999)—who first showed that such syntactic, semantic, morphological and prosodic properties of pronouns are in fact derivable from their syntactic structure—linguists have proposed various accounts of syntactic deficiency to explain the behavior of deficient pronouns. In this section I overview some of these accounts in order to set up the typological landscape into which *us*$_{SG}$ needs placing. As we will see, a deficient pronoun can lack functional projections, it can be phrasal (weak) or a head (clitic), and it can be featurally underspecified.

In their study, Cardinaletti & Starke (1994, 1999) showed that the model of pronominal deficiency is more fine-grained than just strong *vs* weak. They note that strong pronouns are differentiated from weak and clitic pronouns in terms of reference (human *vs* human and non-human) (7a), allowing modification (7b), syntactic position (7c), allowing coordination (7d) and morphological complexity. Weak pronouns differ from clitic pronouns in categorial status (XP or X^0) and prosody (word accent *vs* no word accent).

(7) a. {**Il**$_{H/NH}$ / **lui**$_{H/*NH}$} est beau
{He$_{DF}$ / he$_{STR}$} is beautiful
'He/It is beautiful.'

b. vraiment {**lui**$_{STR}$ / ***il**$_{DF}$*}
really {him$_{STR}$ / *him$_{DF}$}
'(It's) really him.'

c. Jean **les**$_{DF}$ trouve belles / John trouve **elles**$_{STR}$ belles
John them$_{DF}$ finds pretty / John finds them$_{STR}$ pretty
'John finds them pretty.'

d. {**Loro** / ***esse***} e quelle accanto sono troppo alte.
{she$_{STR}$ / she$_{DF}$} and those next.to be too tall
'She and those next to her are too tall.'

They argue for three pronoun types that correspond to the three structures in (8). *Strong* pronouns consist of a lexical layer (L), functional projections (IP), lexical accent (ΣP) (responsible for word stress) and case (CP); *weak* pronouns lack the highest layer; *clitic* pronouns lack the highest two layers.

(8) a. *Strong pronoun:*
[**C$_L$P** [Σ_L**P** [I_LP [LP]]]]

b. *Weak pronoun:*
[Σ_LP [I_LP [LP]]]

c. *Clitic pronoun:*
[I_LP [LP]]

Déchaine & Wiltschko (2002) suggest an alternative, finer-grained typology: the largest pronouns are pro-DPs (9a), followed by pro-ϕPs (9b) and finally pro-NPs (9c). Crucially for Déchaine & Wiltschko, deficiency spans the D/ϕ/N categories—*strong*, *weak* and *clitic* pronouns may all be e.g., pro-ϕs (10).

(9) a. $[_{DP}$ D $[_{\phi P}$ ϕ $[_{NP}$ N]]] b. $[_{\phi P}$ ϕ $[_{NP}$ N]] c. $[_{NP}$ N]

(10) a. *Strong ϕP* $[_{\phi P}$ ϕ $[_{NP}$ N]] b. *Weak ϕP* $[_{\phi P}$ ϕ] c. *Clitic ϕ* [ϕ]

More recently, analyses of structural deficiency go beyond missing layers and argue for featural underspecification of existing layers. For example, Fenger (2018) argues for two structurally deficient impersonals: imp-N and imp-ϕ (see also Holmberg & Phimsawat 2017 a.o.). Imp-ϕs are underspecified for ϕ-features, meaning that they must be compatible with any choice of person (including the speaker/hearer). As a result, Imp-ϕs are compatible with generic readings but *incompatible* with existential readings.

(11) When **one** is in Italy, one eats pasta. GEN

(12) ***One** has called for you, but I don't know what it was about. EXIST

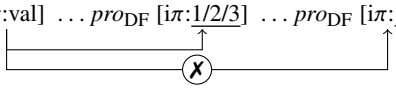
Similarly, Ruda (2021) adopts a featural underspecification account of third person Polish pronouns with unspecific interpretation. In (13a), the pronoun *jej* is unspecific (i.e., does not pick out a particular girl; cf. the specific use in (13b)). Ruda argues that the specific pronoun is specified for π and # ϕ-features, but the unspecific pronoun is unspecified for π ϕ-features. The absence of π features is what allows third person forms to have an unspecific reading.

(13) a. A: Nie mam dziewczyny / B: Czemu sobie **jej** nie znajdziesz?
not have.1SG girl / why self.DAT her.GEN not find.2SG
'I do not have a girlfriend.' / 'Why won't you find **one** for yourself?'

b. **Jej** mąż jest Polak
her.GEN husband is a Pole
'Her husband is Polish.'

Finally, Stegovec (2020) argues that deficient pronouns that are sensitive to the Person-Case Constraint (PCC) are also featurally underspecified. Stegovec proposes that these weak pronouns enter the derivation with unvalued π features that are valued by a functional head (e.g. *v*) bearing a valued π feature. Stegovec's proposal derives the Strong PCC as a constraint on Agree: *v* can only supply the highest deficient pronoun (the IO) with a π feature. Lower deficient pronouns (e.g., the DO) get the default 3rd person (14).[3]

(14) $[_{vP}$ v [uπ:val] ... pro_{DF} [iπ:1/2/3] ... pro_{DF} [iπ:__] $\Rightarrow$ 3]



As these examples show, featural underspecification produces a model of pronominal deficiency that is even more fine-grained than that of Déchaine & Wiltschko (2002). That is, deficient pronouns can not only lack certain functional projections, be phrasal (*weak*) or a head (*clitic*), but they can also be underspecified for all or only some of their ϕ-features, and underspecification can mean absent or unvalued. It is into this fine-grained model of pronominal deficiency that I will place us_{SG}. In particular, I propose that us_{SG} is a ϕ-clitic. It lacks upper functional layers and is a head. I propose too that the ϕ-feature bundle itself is deficient: it is specified for π features but lacks # features.

(15) $[_{\phi}$ π:1]

Underspecification for number requires the ϕ-clitic to be compatible with all number values. That is, "singular" *us* is underlyingly number neutral. That it is morphologically plural is in accordance with the fact that plural nouns are compatible with singular and plural interpretations (16). As we will see in Section 4, the pronoun takes on unambiguously singular reference as a *polite pronoun*.

(16) A: Do you have **children?** B: Yes, **one**. (Sauerland et al. 2005)

[3] Stegovec (2020) also derives the Weak PCC and accounts for a novel pattern in which it is the *indirect* object's person value that is restricted. See Stegovec 2020 for details.

3. Accounting for the data

Having proposed that us_{SG} is a ϕ-clitic, this section turns to the two new empirical facts about us_{SG}: (i) us_{SG} cannot be locally c-commanded by *I* in dream reports and (ii) us_{SG} lacks a bound variable reading.

3.1. Singular "us" in dream reports

Lakoff (1972) observed that two first person pronouns can violate the ban on local co-reference in dream reports. In simple declaratives, co-reference between the subject and object of the same argument must be expressed with a reflexive pronoun (17a). This is not true for dream reports (17b). The idea here is that the subject and object of *kiss* in (17b) refer to two counterparts: my dream-self (the person I mentally identify with in the dream) and my bodily alternative (who could appear in the dream as a third person).[4]

(17) a. **I** kissed {*me / **myself**}
b. I dreamed that I was Brigitte Bardot and **I** kissed **me**.

Interestingly, (17b) fails to carry over to us_{SG}. Speakers judge (18) as ungrammatical.

(18) *I dreamed that I was Brigitte Bardot and **I** kissed ***us*$_{SG}$**.

At first blush, we may want to attribute (18) to *De Re* Blocking, a mechanism proposed by Anand (2006) to account for the possible interpretations of pronominal counterparts in dream reports. *De Re* Blocking aims to account for the fact that pronouns in dream reports are restricted as to the individual counterpart they pick out. Specifically, the first pronoun must pick out the dream-self and the second pronoun must pick out the bodily counterpart (see also Percus & Sauerland 2003, Pearson & Dery 2014).

(19) a. I dreamed that I was Brigitte Bardot and $\mathbf{I}_{\text{DREAM-SELF}}$ kissed $\mathbf{me}_{\text{BODILY.ALT}}$
b. # I dreamed that I was Brigitte Bardot and $\mathbf{I}_{\text{BODILY.ALT}}$ kissed $\mathbf{me}_{\text{DREAM-SELF}}$

To explain this, Anand argues that the dream-self corresponds to the *de se* construal of the pronoun, and that *dream* selects for a CP headed by a logophoric operator OP-LOG. All *de se* pronouns in English dream reports must be bound by OP-LOG.

(20) I dreamed [OP-LOG that $\text{I}_{\text{DE SE}}$ kissed $\text{me}_{\text{DE RE}}$] = LF for (19a)

The unattested interpretation in (19b) is ruled out by the *De Re* Blocking Effect (21).

(21) De Re Blocking Effect (Anand 2006: 10)
No (syntactic) *de se* anaphor can be c-commanded by a *de re* counterpart.

(22) [I dreamed OP-LOG that $\text{I}_{\text{DE RE}}$ kissed me $_{\text{DE SE}}$] = unattested (19b)

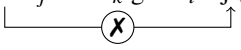
The consequence of this is that any obligatorily (syntactic) *de se* anaphor should be ungrammatical as the non-*de se* counterpart (i.e., the second pronoun). Anand argues that this is the case for LOG-Mandarin[5] *ziji*, an obligatorily *de se* anaphor (Pan 1997). Consider (23). The only felicitous reading of (23) is one in which *ziji* is co-indexed with George ($_k$). This is because *ziji*, as an obligatorily *de se* anaphor, must be bound by OP-LOG: if *ziji* is co-indexed with George ($_i$), this is the non-*de se* counterpart and *ziji* fails to be bound by OP-LOG at all; if *ziji* is co-indexed with the dream-self ($_j$), it must have been bound by OP-LOG across the non-*de se* counterpart, violating *De Re* Blocking (24). Thus, the only felicitous LF is (25).

(23) George_i meng-dao ta_j shi Brigitte Bardot erqie John_k gei $\text{ta}_{i/j}$ $\text{ziji}_{*i/*j/k}$ de hua
George dream he COP Brigitte Bardot and John give him self DE picture
'George_i dreamed he_j was Brigitte Bardot and John_k gave $\text{him}_{i/j}$ {his_k/*his_i/*his_j} picture.'

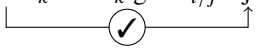
[4] That *me* can be locally bound by *I* in this configuration suggests that *counterparts* of a single individual are not fully co-referential (i.e., they are disjoint), thus obviating Condition B (Sells 1985).

[5] Anand specifies two Mandarin dialects: LOG(ophoric)-Mandarin and IND(exical)-Mandarin. Only LOG-Mandarin derives the *de se* reading of *ziji* via binding by OP-LOG, thus only LOG-Mandarin *ziji* is subject to *De Re* Blocking.

(24) [OP-LOG$_j$ John$_k$ gei ta$_i$ ziji$_{*j}$ de hua]



(25) [OP-LOG$_k$ John$_k$ gei ta$_{i/j}$ ziji$_k$ de hua]



If *us$_{SG}$* is an obligatorily *de se* pronoun, the ungrammticality of (18) is explained in the same way. However, *us$_{SG}$* does not appear to be obligatorily *de se* like LOG-Mandarin *ziji*. In (26), *ziji* is only licensed in the *de se* context S_1—if Zhangsan does not self-ascribe as being the target of the theft, as in S_2, *ziji* cannot be used. On the other hand, *us$_{SG}$* is acceptable in the *de se* context S_1 *and* the non-*de se* context S_2.

(26) S_1: Zhangsan says, "That thief stole my purse!"
S_2: Zhangsan says, "That thief stole that purse!" (can't see that it was *his* purse)

Zhangsan shuo pashou tou-le **ziji**-de pibao (Huang & Liu 2001)
Zhangsan say pickpocket steal-PERF self-DE purse
'Zhangsan said that the pickpocket stole his purse.' [✓S_1, # S_2]

(27) S_1: John says, "That thief hit you!"
S_2: John says, "That thief hit the woman in the blue dress!" (doesn't know that woman is me)

'John thinks that the thief hit ***us$_{SG}$***.' [✓S_1, ✓S_2]

The *De Re* Blocking Effect will thus not explain the unacceptability of (18). However, the issue with (18) is tied to co-indexation with the subject counterpart. If *us$_{SG}$* is locally c-commanded by a non-coindexed pronoun, the ungrammaticality disappears.

(28) John dreamed that he was Chomsky and **he** hired ***us$_{SG}$*** as a Research Assistant.

For the rest of this section I argue that the ungrammaticality of (18) can be explained using Lasnik's (1989) generalization that less referential expressions cannot bind more referential ones. Lasnik is concerned with Condition C cross-linguistically, noting that while in English R-expressions must be totally free (29), in Vietnamese they only need to be free locally (30) and in Thai there is no restriction (31).

(29) a. *John$_i$ saw John$_i$.
b. *John$_i$ thinks that John$_i$ wasn't chosen.

(30) a. **John**$_i$ tin [$_{CP}$ **John**$_i$ sẽ thắńg]
John thinks John will win
b. * **John**$_i$ thuóng **John**$_i$
John likes John

(31) a. **c**ɔɔ**n**$_i$ khít [$_{CP}$ wâa **c**ɔɔ**n**$_i$ chálaàt]
John thinks that John is smart
b. **c**ɔɔ**n**$_i$ chɔɔp **c**ɔɔ**n**$_i$
John likes John

However, if the the first R-expression in (29)–(31) is replaced with a pronoun or an epithet, *all* the examples become ungrammatical (Lasnik 1989: 154–6). This tells us two things: (i) R-expressions must be *pronoun*-free and (ii) epithets behave like pronouns. Epithets also behave like pronouns in that they must be locally free (Lasnik 1989: 154–5). However, epithets also behave like R-expressions. First, they cannot be bound by a pronoun (see (i)) (Lasnik 1989: 155). Second, in both Vietnamese and Thai, epithets can be non-locally bound while in English they must be totally free (32) (cf. (29), (30a) and (31a)).

(32) a. *__John__$_i$ thinks [$_{CP}$ that I admire **the idiot**$_i$]
b. **John**$_i$ tin [$_{CP}$ **thằng cho de**$_i$ sẽ thằng] Vietnamese
John thinks the son of a bitch will win
c. **c**ɔɔ**n**$_i$ khít [$_{CP}$ wăa ʔ**âybâa**$_i$ chàlaàt] Thai
John thinks that the nut is smart

The upshot of all of this is that R-expressions (names), epithets and pronouns form a *referentiality hierarchy* (33), with less referential expressions being unable to bind more referential ones.

(33) R-expression > epithet > pronoun (> = 'more referential')

Now consider again (18), repeated below as (34). The problem with (34) is that us_{SG} cannot be bound by *I* in dream reports while the referentially identical *me* can.

(34) *I dreamed that I was Brigitte Bardot and **I** kissed ***us*$_{SG}$**.

I propose that us_{SG} cannot be bound by *I* in dream reports because it is *more referential* than ordinary pronouns. We can think of ordinary pronouns as variables that are capable of receiving multiple interpretations from various (non-)linguistic antecedents. For example, in (35a) *her* can be (i) co-referential with Mary, (ii) refer to another salient person in the discourse context or (iii) be a bound variable. Likewise in (35b), *my* can be construed as (i) co-referential with *I* or (ii) as a bound variable.

(35) a. Only Mary finished **her** homework.
   i. 'Only M finished **M**'s HW.'
   ii. 'Only M finished (e.g.) **Sue**'s HW.'
   iii. 'Nobody else finished **their** HW.'

b. Only I finished **my** homework.
   i. 'Only I finished **my** HW.'
   ii. 'Nobody else finished **their** HW.'

Crucially, us_{SG} does not behave like other indexical pronouns in allowing a bound variable reading. That is, us_{SG} is strictly referential (it always refers to the current speaker) and thus behaves more like a definite description (or R-expression) than other pronouns.[6] Consider first the binding relation in a dream report involving *I* and *me* (e.g., (17b)): *I* (a pronoun) binds *me* (a pronoun). Since neither is more referential than the other, this does not violate the ban on less referential expressions binding more referential ones. This is not so when the binding relation in a dream report involves *I* and us_{SG}: *I* (a pronoun) binds us_{SG} (for all intents and purposes here a definite description). Since *I* is less referential than us_{SG}, this configuration violates the ban on less referential expressions binding more referential ones. As expected, the ungrammaticality disappears if us_{SG} is free (i.e., not c-commanded by a (partially) co-indexed pronoun). In (36), us_{SG} is not bound by *he*, and thus the relative referentiality of the two expressions is irrelevant.[7] The next section turns to the lack of a bound variable reading of us_{SG}.

(36) John dreamed that he was Chomsky and **he** hired ***us*$_{SG}$** as a Research Assistant.

3.2. Bound variable anaphora and indexical pronouns

Like other pronouns, indexicals allow for two interpretations: referential (REF) and bound (BVA) (Partee 1989, Kratzer 2009). On the referential reading, the pronoun in (37) picks out the current speaker at the utterance context. On the bound reading, it picks out any *x* such that *x* did not get a package that excited *x*.

[6] This does not mean that us_{SG} behaves like an R-expression in all contexts (cf. epithets). What's important is that us_{SG} has some R-expression properties (i.e., non-variable reference), thus making it *more* referential than pure pronouns.

[7] When us_{SG} is locally free it can still be c-commanded by *I* (i). This could be problematic for the analysis, but see Patel-Grosz 2014 and references therein on epithets showing mixed obviative effects. There is an alternative analysis. Kauf (2018) argues that in dream reports (and counterindenticals) the first pronoun is a composed individual (an entity with properties of the dream-self and the dreamer) (ii). This analysis looks a lot like that of partial co-reference (iii), e.g., Kiparsky 2002. Interestingly, Cysouw & Fernández Landaluce (2012) observe that while independent subject/object pronouns allow partial co-reference, if the subject and object are realized as inflectional affixes on the verb, partial co-reference is impossible (this holds in Basque, Tennet, Dumi, Yimas, Apalai and Bunuba; Hampe & Lehmann (2013) add Hixkaryana and Mangarayi). They suggest that partial co-reference becomes less possible the more grammaticalized the person form. To support this hypothesis, they show that some languages (Spanish, Dutch) allow partial co-reference with independent pronouns and clitics (which are more grammaticalized forms), while others (Italian, Serbo-Croatian) allow partial co-reference with independent pronouns but *not* clitics. At least for Spanish and Serbo-Croatian, this holds of dream reports too: independent pronouns and clitics are grammatical in Spanish dream reports (Aarón Sánchez, p.c), but only independent pronouns are grammatical in Serbo-Croatian ones (Ivana Jovović, p.c). If us_{SG} is a clitic, it may be that English is like Serbo-Croatian in allowing partial co-reference with independent pronouns but not clitics.

(i) I know that you love ***us*$_{SG}$**.

(ii) I_i dreamed I was BB_j and I_{i+j} kissed me_i.

(iii) We_{i+j} voted for me_i.

(37) Only I got a package that excited me.

a. = 'Nobody else got a package that excited me.' REF

b. = 'Nobody else got a package that excited them.' BVA

I adopt Kratzer's (2009) approach to bound variable anaphora. Kratzer argues that bound variables enter the derivation ϕ-featureless (as *minimal pronouns*) and that they inherit their ϕ-features from a binder (a λ-operator) introduced by a functional head (e.g., *v*). Thus, (37b) has the following derivation. The binder $\lambda_{[n]}$ is introduced by *v* (38a). Next, *v* introduces the external argument (EA) in Spec-*v*P and *Predication* (39) applies. The ϕ-features of the λ-operator and the EA unify (38b). Finally, the bound pronoun inherits the ϕ-features of the λ-operator under *Feature Transmission* (40), shown in (38c).[8]

(38) a. $[_{vP}\ v\ \boxed{\lambda_{[n]}}\ [_{VP}$ got $[_{DP}$ a package that excited $pro_{[n]}]]]$

b. $[_{vP}\ \boxed{I_{[1SG]}}\ v\ \boxed{\lambda_{[1SG]}}\ [_{VP}$ got $[_{DP}$ a package that excited $pro_{[n]}]]]]$ *Predication* (39)

c. $[_{vP}\ I_{[1SG]}\ v\ \boxed{\lambda_{[1SG]}}\ [_{VP}$ got $[_{DP}$ a package that excited $\boxed{pro_{[1SG]}}]]]]$ *Feature Transmission* (40)

(39) *Predication (Specifier-Head Agreement under Binding)*
When a DP occupies the specifier position of a head that carries a λ-operator, their ϕ-feature sets unify.

(40) *Feature Transmission under Binding*
The ϕ-feature set of a bound DP unifies with the ϕ-feature set of the functional head that hosts its binder.

Finally, Vocabulary Insertion (VI) applies. The VI rules for English oblique pronouns tell us to spell-out {[1][SG]} as *me*. Now recall that us_{SG} lacks this bound variable reading. This is particularly intriguing in light of the fact that, cross-linguistically, it is deficient pronouns that allow bound variable interpretations (Cardinaletti & Starke 1994, Despić 2013).

(41) Only I got a question that made us_{SG} feel stupid.

a. = 'Nobody else got a question that made me feel stupid.' REF

b. ≠ 'Nobody else got a question that made them feel stupid.' *BVA

I propose that us_{SG} lacks a bound variable reading (i) because there is no equally deficient nominative counterpart of us_{SG} and (ii) because the conditions governing VI ensure that *me* always wins out. Let's start with (i). I proposed in Section 2 that us_{SG} is a ϕ-clitic. Following Baker (1988), I assume that cliticization involves syntactic incorporation (see also e.g., Roberts 2010). Evidence for this comes from the fact that cliticization behaves like Noun Incorporation (NI) proper (incorporation of a root noun). Baker notes three restrictions on the distribution of NI: it is (i) disallowed out of a PP, (ii) disallowed out of an NP adjunct, and (iii) restricted to internal arguments (there is no transitive subject NI). Crucially, cliticization is subject to the same restrictions: cliticization (i) out of a PP, (ii) out of an adjunct, and (iii) of a subject is disallowed (see Baker 1988: 81–87 for details). The last restriction is relevant here. The restriction against subject incorporation predicts (correctly) that the ϕ-clitic that corresponds to us_{SG} does not have a nominative counterpart (Edwards 1993). In other words, there is no equally deficient pronoun that can antecede the minimal pronoun.[9] With this in mind, consider what the derivation for the (ungrammatical) bound variable reading of (41) would look like. Up until VI it would be identical to (38). The bound pronoun's antecedent must bear [1SG] because the featurally deficient ϕ-clitic is impossible in subject position.

[8] This is a simplification of Kratzer's (2009) analysis for exposition reasons. Kratzer would actually say that the ϕ-features that end up on the minimal pronoun are base-generated on the closest *v* to the minimal pronoun (*excited*) because the subject of the relative clause (*that*) is itself a minimal pronoun. But crucially, the features on this *v* must match those of the matrix subject (*I*) or a bound variable reading does not obtain. Kratzer is unclear on how this is achieved. See Stegovec (2019) for one implementation involving multiple Agree relations between phase heads. What is important is that the λ-binder that binds the minimal pronoun in (38) must be specified for [1SG] because these are the features on the matrix subject (that is, we cannot randomly generate a λ-binder with only [1]).

[9] Moreover, since bound variable anaphora also involve a focus operator like *only* preceding the binder, a deficient pronoun is independently ruled out of appearing in this position.

(42) a. [$_{vP}$ v $\boxed{\lambda_{[n]}}$ [$_{VP}$ got [$_{DP}$ a question that made $pro_{[n]}$ feel stupid]]]

b. [$_{vP}$ $\boxed{I_{[1SG]}}$ v $\boxed{\lambda_{[1SG]}}$ [$_{VP}$ got [$_{DP}$ a question that made $pro_{[n]}$ feel stupid]]]] *Predication* (39)

c. [$_{vP}$ $I_{[1SG]}$ v $\boxed{\lambda_{[1SG]}}$ [$_{VP}$ got [$_{DP}$ a question that made $\boxed{pro_{[1SG]}}$ feel stupid]]]] *Feature Transmission* (40)

VI applies. However, VI is constrained by the Subset Principle (Halle 1997).

(43) *Subset Principle*

a. A VI is inserted if the item matches all or only a subset of the grammatical features specified in the terminal morpheme.

b. Insertion does not take place if the VI contains features not present in the morpheme.

c. Where several VIs meet the conditions for insertion, the item matching the greatest number of features in the terminal morpheme must apply.

(43a-b) allows for *me* or us_{SG} to be the exponent of $pro_{[1SG]}$: *me* matches all of the features, us_{SG} matches a subset of them, and neither contain any features that are not [1] or [SG]. However, (43c) ensures that *me* must ultimately be picked; while us_{SG} meets the conditions for insertion, *me* matches the greatest number of features in the bundle {[1SG]}. Thus, under the current featurally deficient ϕ-clitic analysis, there is no derivation in which us_{SG} expones a first person singular bound variable—because there is no equally deficient binder and because the Subset Principle ensures $pro_{[1SG]}$ is spelled-out as *me*—as desired.

3.3. Interim Conclusion

This section has shown how a featurally deficient ϕ-clitic analysis of us_{SG} accounts for two novel empirical facts: us_{SG} cannot be c-commanded by *I* in dream reports and it lacks a bound variable reading. I have argued that in fact the latter is responsible for the former. That is, because us_{SG} lacks a bound variable reading it is more referential than an ordinary pronoun. Given Lasnik's ban on less referential expressions binding more referential ones, *I* is correctly predicted to be unable to bind us_{SG} in dream reports. I then argued that it is the underspecification for # that means that us_{SG} lacks this bound variable reading.

In the next section I turn to the final puzzle: if us_{SG} is underspecified for #, it should be compatible with all number values (i.e., it is number neutral) and yet the salient interpretation of this deficient *us* is singular. I claim that this follows from us_{SG} being a polite pronoun.

4. Politeness

Polite pronouns—those that communicate information about the social relation between two individuals—may refer to *honorific* or *familiar* address (Brown & Gilman 1960). Honorific pronouns typically indicate that one individual has a higher social status than another. For instance, to refer to a (singular) addressee of higher social rank in French, the second person *plural* pronoun is used (45).

(44) As **tu** le livre?
have.PRES.2SG **2SG** the book
'Do you have the book?'

(45) Avez **vous** le livre?
have.PRES.2PL **2PL** the book
'Do you (HON) have the book?

In (45), the use of *vous* involves a form-meaning mismatch: the pronoun is morphosyntactically 2PL but semantically 2SG. This makes *vous* referentially ambiguous—it could pick out a plural group of addressees or a single addressee depending on the intended pragmatic effect of the interaction. In fact, the use of plural for singular address in honorific contexts is abundant cross-linguistically (e.g., Helmbrecht 2015 a.o), suggesting that referential ambiguity is a typologically robust honorific strategy.[10] Building on this, Wang (2023) observes the broader typological generalization that pronouns utilize only a small number of existing features for honorific reference: plural, third person and indefinite. Wang argues that this is because these features are semantically unmarked (i.e., presuppositionless) and because honorificity

[10]It is beyond the scope of this paper to adopt a particular syntactic or semantic formalization of polite pronouns. For this, see e.g., Ackema & Neeleman 2018, Portner et al. 2019.

is constrained by the two maxims in (46) (see Wang 2023 for details). In other words, plural, third person and indefinite are more referentially ambigious than singular, 1/2 person and definite.

(46) a. *Taboo of Directness (ToD)*
In respect contexts, use the form with the weakest presupposition.

b. *Maximize Presupposition!* (Heim 1991)
Choose the strongest presupposition compatible with what is assumed in the conversation.

However, the communicative effect of referential ambiguity is not limited to honorific pronouns. In addition to showing respect, pronoun choice may also reflect empathy, affection or intimacy between interlocutors. In languages with a dedicated honorific, this often looks like using the non-honorific form—e.g., *tu* in French. But some authors argue for dedicated "solidarity" pronouns (different from neutral, non-honorific pronouns like *tu*), and these too are referentially ambigious. I will discuss two cases here. Cheshire (2013) argues that 1SG *man* in Multicultural London English (MLE; see Cheshire et al. 2008) is used by speakers to solicit empathy from or construct solidarity with the addressee. In particular, it serves to position speaker and addressee as part of the same social group. (47) gives an example in which the speaker, Alex, uses *man* to refer to himself when talking to his girlfriend, possibly to make the remark "less confrontational and face threatening" (Cheshire 2013: 621). Just as third person forms are recruited for honorificity (in e.g., German), third person is recruited for solidarity in MLE.

(47) didn't I tell you **man=**(1SG) wanna come see you I don't date your friends I date you

Similarly, De Cock (2011) argues that the 2SG reading of 1PL pronouns (or verbal agreement) in English and Spanish establishes solidarity with a hearer by emphasizing empathy. De Cock says of these uses ". . . the speaker assimilates the addresser (with whom he identifies) and the addressee . . . as part of one group." Again, referential ambiguity is employed (via plural) to communicate in-group solidarity.

(48) Have **we=**(2SG) eaten **our** sandwich?

(49) **Nos** **hemos** tomado ya las medicinas?
US-REFL have.1PL taken already the medicines
'Have we taken our medicines already?'

Relevant here is that Snell (2007) also suggests that us_{SG} is used to construct empathy or solidarity. When a group of girls is giving each other piggybacks and stealing each others shoes, one child (Clare) pleads "Gemma, give us_{SG} it", "give us_{SG} it", "Rosie, give us_{SG} it", "give us_{SG} my shoe back". Snell says:

> Clare is not a fully integrated member of this group, and therefore the interaction ranks low on a scale of solidarity. I would suggest that Clare . . . acknowledges her place within this social group through the use of singular us. In this interaction, her first goal is to integrate with the group . . . [and t]he use of singular us is perhaps a way of appealing to some sense of group support, as if Clare's request has the backing of a group.

I thus propose that us_{SG} constitutes another instance of referential ambiguity for pragmatic effect. As discussed in Section 2, "singular" *us* is actually number neutral; it is unspecified for # features, thus allowing for both singular and plural interpretations. Crucially, the possibility of a plural interpretation allows (deficient) *us* to be picked up by the grammar as a polite (solidarity) pronoun where it takes on unambigiously singular reference (see also Brown & Levinson 1987: 127). Additional evidence that us_{SG} functions as a solidarity pronoun comes from its distribution. Although it is theoretically unrestricted (see (2)), for some speakers us_{SG} is limited to imperatives. This is not surprising if us_{SG} is a polite pronoun—imperatives are inherently face threatening acts that a speaker is likely to want to mitigate with a politeness strategy. That it is licensed in other syntactic configurations only goes to show that us_{SG} has become a salient pragmatic marker of friendliness and thus a way to construct solidarity with an in-group.

To summarize, the featurally deficient, number neutral analysis of us_{SG} that I have proposed (that us_{SG} has π but not # features) is compatible with the fact that *us* is regularly unambigiously singular. This is because the referentially ambigious deficient *us* is used as a polite pronoun.

5. Conclusions

This paper has presented two new empirical generalizations about singular *us*, a deficient pronoun in British English that until now has not received any attention in the generative literature: us_{SG} cannot be locally c-commanded by *I* in dream reports and us_{SG} lacks a bound variable reading. To account for these facts, I proposed that us_{SG} is a ϕ-clitic that is specified for π features but underspecified for #. This also had the effect of making "singular" *us* underlyingly number neutral. I argued that unambigiously singular *us* is a *solidarity* (polite) pronoun in British English, used to engender intimacy and in-group status between speaker and addressee. Under the current number neutral analysis, us_{SG}—like many other pronouns cross-linguistically—is utilizing referential ambiguity for pragmatic effect.

The current study contributes a new pronoun to the existing typology of pronominal deficiency. Moreover, us_{SG} exhibits behavior that existing models of deficiency do not predict, namely that it lacks a bound variable reading. This suggests that while deficiency may make bound variable interpretations more available, it does not guarantee that a bound variable reading obtains. If the current analysis is correct, bound variable readings of other deficient pronouns may be constrained by their ϕ-feature makeup. There is an interesting correlate to us_{SG} in this regard from Hall (2020), who argues that the impersonal pronoun *man* in MLE is underspecified for ϕ-features, and it too lacks a bound variable reading.

Finally, this investigation has provided an empirical foundation on which to continue exploration into the properties of us_{SG} and furthered our insight into regional English dialects.

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