English personal pronouns

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The personal pronouns in English take various forms according to number, person, case and natural gender. Modern English has very little inflection of nouns or adjectives, to the point where some authors describe it as an analytic language, but the Modern English system of personal pronouns has preserved some of the inflectional complexity of Old English and Middle English.

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Forms of personal pronouns

Unlike nouns, which are undeclined for case except for possession (woman/woman's), English personal pronouns have a number of forms, which are named according to their typical grammatical role in a sentence:[n 1]

- subjective (nominative) case (I, we, etc.), used as the subject of a verb (see also Case usage below).
- objective (oblique) case (me, us, etc.), used as the object of a verb or of a preposition (see also Case usage below). The same forms are also used as disjunctive pronouns.
- reflexive form (myself, ourselves, etc.). This typically refers back to a noun or pronoun (its antecedent) within the same clause (for example, She cut herself). This form is also sometimes used optionally in a non-reflexive function, as a substitute for a non-reflexive pronoun (for example, For someone like myself, . . ., This article was written by Professor Smith and myself),[1][2] though some style guides recommend avoiding such use.[3] The same reflexive forms also are used as intensive pronouns (for example, She made the dress herself).
- two possessive (genitive) forms, used to indicate the possessor of something (in a broad sense). The first group (my, our, etc.) are used as determiners (possessive determiners, also called possessive adjectives), coming together with a noun, as in my house. The second group (mine, ours, etc.) are used as pronouns (as in I prefer mine) or as predicate adjectives (as in this book is mine). For details see English possessive.

Table of basic personal pronouns

The basic personal pronouns of modern English are shown in the table below. (For the distinction between the forms, see the previous section, and Case usage below.)

Personal pronouns in standard Modern English

		Singular					Plural				
		Subject	Object	Possessive determiner	Possessive pronoun	Reflexive	Subject	Object	Possessive determiner	Possessive pronoun	Reflexive
First		I	me	my	mine	myself	we	us	our	ours	ourselves
Second		you		your	yours	yourself	you		your	yours	yourselves
Third	Masculine	he	him	his		himself	they	them	their	theirs	themselves
	Feminine	she	her		hers	herself					
	Neuter	it		its		itself					
	Nonspecific	they	them	their	theirs	themself (themselves)					

Other English pronouns which have distinct forms of the above types are the indefinite pronoun one, which has the reflexive oneself (the possessive form is written one's, like a regular English possessive); and the interrogative and relative pronoun who, which has the objective form whom (now confined mostly to formal English) and the possessive whose (which in its relative use can also serve as the possessive for which).

Archaic and non-standard forms

Apart from the standard forms given above, English also has a number of non-standard, informal and archaic forms of personal pronouns.

- An archaic set of second-person singular pronouns is thou, thee, thyself, thy, thine. They were used as a familiar form, like French tu and German du. They passed out of general use between 1600 and 1800, although they (or variants of them) survive in some English and Scottish dialects and in some Christian religious communities. For details see thou.

	Singular				
	Subject	Object	Possessive determiner	Possessive pronoun	Reflexive
Second	thou	thee	thy	thine	thyself

- In archaic language, mine and thine may be used in place of my and thy when followed by a vowel sound.
- An archaic form of plural you as a subject pronoun is ye. Some dialects now use ye in place of you, or as an apocopated or clitic form of you. See ye (pronoun).
- A non-standard variant of my (particularly in British dialects) is me. (This may have its origins in the fact that in Middle English my before a consonant was pronounced [mi:], like modern English me, (while me was [me:], similar to modern may) and this was shortened to [mi] or [mɪ], as the pronouns he and we are nowadays; [hi wɒz] he was; versus [ɪt wɒz hi:] it was he. As this vowel was short, it was not subject to the Great Vowel Shift, and so emerged in modern English unchanged.)
- Informal second-person plural forms (particularly in American dialects) include you all, y'all, youse. Other variants include: yous, you/youse guys, you/youse gals, you-uns, yis, yinz. Possessives may include you(r) guys's, you(r) gals's, yous's, y'all's (or y'alls). Reflexives may be formed by adding selves after any of the possessive forms. See y'all, yinz, yous. Yous is common in Scotland, particularly in the Central Belt area (though in some parts of the country, ye is used for the plural you).
- In informal speech them is often replaced by 'em, believed to be a survival of the late Old English form heom, which appears as hem in Chaucer, losing its aspiration due to being used as an unstressed form. (The forms they, them etc. are of Scandinavian origin.)[4]
- The plural forms they, them, etc. are sometimes used with singular meaning when referring to a person, particularly to avoid awkwardness when the gender of the referent is unknown or unspecified. See the section below and the article on singular they for more details.
- Non-standard reflexive forms ourself and themself are sometimes used in contexts where we and they are used with singular meaning (see we and singular they).
- Non-standard reflexive forms hisself and theirselves/theirself are sometimes used (though would be considered incorrect in standard English).

A more complete table, including the standard forms and some of the above forms, is given below. Nonstandard, informal and archaic forms are in italics.

			personal pronoun			possessive pronoun	possessive determiner
			subject	object	reflexive		
first-person	singular		I	me	myself	mine	my mine (before vowel) me (esp. BrE)
	plural		we	us	ourselves ourself	ours	our
second-person	singular	standard (archaic formal)	you	you	yourself	yours	your
		archaic informal	thou	thee	thyself	thine	thy thine (before vowel)
	plural	standard	you	you	yourselves	yours	your
		archaic	ye	you	yourselves	yours	your
		nonstandard	you all y'all youse etc. (see above)	you all y'all youse	y'all's (or y'alls) selves	y'all's (or y'alls)	y'all's (or y'alls)
third-person	singular	masculine	he*	him*	himself hisself	his*	his*
		feminine	she	her	herself	hers	her
		neuter	it	it	itself	-	its
		epicene (see singular they)	they	them	themself themselves theirself theirselves	theirs	their
	plural		they	them	themselves theirselves	theirs	their
generic (formal)			one	one	oneself	one's	one's
generic (informal)			you	you	yourself	your	your
interrogative/relative pronoun			who	whom who	-	whose	whose

* In religious usage, the pronouns He, Him, and His are often capitalized when referring to the deity.[5]

For further archaic forms, and information on the evolution of the personal pronouns of English, see Old English pronouns.

Generic you

Main article: Generic you

The pronoun you (and its other forms) can be used as a generic or indefinite pronoun, referring to a person in general. A more formal equivalent is the indefinite pronoun one (reflexive oneself, possessive one's). For example, you should keep your secrets to yourself may be used in place of the more formal one should keep one's secrets to oneself.

Use of he, she and it

Main article: Gender in English

It and its are normally used to refer to an inanimate object or abstract concept. The masculine pronouns, he and his are used to refer to male persons, while the feminine pronouns, she and her are used to refer to female persons; however babies and young children of indeterminate gender may sometimes be referred to as it (e.g. a child needs its mother).[6]

Traditionally, in English, if the gender of a person was not known or ambiguous, then the masculine pronouns were often used by default (e.g. a good student always does his homework). Increasingly, though, singular they is coming to be used in such cases (see below).[7]

Animals are often referred to as it, but he and she are sometimes used for animals when the animal's sex is known and is of interest, particularly for higher animals, especially pets and other domesticated animals.[6] Inanimate objects with which humans have a close relationship, such as ships, cars and countries considered as political, rather than geographical, entities, are sometimes referred to as she.[6] This may also be extended to other entities, such as towns.

Singular they

Main article: Singular they

The plural pronoun they (and its derived forms them, their, etc.) can also be used to refer to one person, particularly when the sex of that person is unknown or unspecified. This is a way of producing gender-neutral language while avoiding disjunctive constructions like he or she, he/she, or s/he .[8]

Even when used with singular meaning, they takes a plural verb: If attacked, the victim should remain exactly where they are.

Some usage writers condemn the use of the singular they, but it is commonly used, both in speech and in writing (e.g. "If a customer requires help, they should contact..."). [7] A consistent pattern of usage can be traced at least as far back as Shakespeare, and possibly even back to Middle English. This usage is authorised and preferred by the Australian Government Manual of Style for official usage in government documents. Those who wish to avoid the use of the "singular they" can sometimes do so by rephrasing the sentence using a plural noun (e.g. "For assistance, customers should contact their...").

Case usage

As noted above, most of the personal pronouns have distinct case forms[9][10] – a subjective (nominative) form and an objective (oblique, accusative) form.[n 1] In certain instances variation arises in the use of these forms.

As a general rule, the subjective form is used when the pronoun is the subject of a verb, as in he kicked the ball, whereas the objective form is used as the direct or indirect object of a verb, or the object (complement) of a preposition.[9][10] For example: Sue kicked him, someone gave him the ball, Mary was with him.

When used as a predicative expression, i.e. as the complement of a form of the copula verb be, the subjective form was traditionally regarded as more correct (as in this is I, it was he), but nowadays the objective form is used predominantly (this is me, it was him), and the use of the subjective in such instances is normally regarded as very formal[9][10] or pedantic; it is more likely (in formal English) when followed by a relative clause (it is we who sent them to die). In some cases the subjective may even appear ungrammatical, as in *is that we in the photograph? (where us would be expected).

When a pronoun is linked to other nouns or pronouns by a coordinating conjunction such as and or or, traditional grammar prescribes that the pronoun should appear in the same form as it would take if it were used alone in the same position: Jay and I will arrive later (since I is used for the subject of a verb), but between you and me (since me is used for the object of a preposition). However in informal and less careful usage this rule may not be consistently followed;[11] it is common to hear Jay and me will arrive... and between you and I. The latter type (use of the subjective form in object position) is seen as an example of hypercorrection, resulting from an awareness that many instances of and me (like that in the first example) are considered to require correction to and I.[9][10]

Similar deviations from the grammatical norm are quite common in other examples where the pronoun does not stand alone as the subject or object, as in Who said us Yorkshiremen [grammatical: we Yorkshiremen] are tight?

When a pronoun stands alone without an explicit verb or preposition, the objective form is commonly used, even when traditional grammarians might prefer the subjective: Who's sitting here? Me. (Here I might be regarded as grammatically correct, since it is short for I am (sitting here), but it would sound formal and pedantic, unless followed by am.)

A particular case of this type occurs when a pronoun stands alone following the word than. Here the objective form is again predominant in informal usage[9] (they are older than us), as would be expected if than were analyzed as a preposition. However traditionally than is considered a conjunction, and so in formal and grammatically careful English the pronoun often takes the form that would appear if than were followed by a clause: they are older than we (by analogy with ...than we are), but she likes him better than me (if the intended meaning is "...than she likes me").

For more examples of some of these points, see Disjunctive pronoun.

See also

- Generic antecedents
- Gender-specific and gender-neutral pronouns
- One (pronoun)
- Wiktionary table of personal pronouns

Notes

1. ^ a b Terminological note:
   Authorities use different terms for the inflectional (case) forms of the personal pronouns, such as the oblique-case form me, which is used as a direct object, indirect object, oblique object, or object of a preposition, as well as other uses. For instance, one standard work on English grammar, A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language, uses the term objective case, while another, The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language, uses the term accusative case. Similarly, some use the term nominative for the form I, while others use the term subjective. It is stressed that case is here used to refer to an inflectional category, not the abstract case (the case roles) used in some formal grammars.

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2. ^ Huddleston, Rodney; Pullum, Geoffrey K. (2002). The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language. Cambridge University Press. pp. 1483–1499. ISBN 978-0-521-43146-0.
3. ^ Gowers, Ernest (1973) [1954]. The Complete Plain Words. revised by Sir Bruce Fraser (2 ed.). HMSO. p. 138. ISBN 0-11-700340-9.
4. ^ Morse-Gagne, Elise E. 2003. Viking pronouns in England: Charting the course of THEY, THEIR, and THEM. (http://linguistlist.org/issues/17/17-3551.html) University of Pennsylvania doctoral dissertation. University Microfilms International. The conclusion that these pronouns are of Scandinavian origin had earlier been published by Kluge in Geschichte der Englischen Sprache in 1899 and by Bjorkman in Scandinavian loan-words in Middle English in 1900, although some scholars have disputed it.
5. ^ The New York Times Guide to Essential Knowledge (http://books.google.com/books?id=XtZnWjnjahsC&pg=PA1087&dq=capitalize+He+Him+reference+to+God&hl=en&sa=X&ei=fpj5TrXgBKno2gXkvtSBAg&ved=0CFQQ6AEwBg#v=onepage&q=capitalize%20He%20Him%20reference%20to%20God&f=false). The New York Times. Retrieved 27 December 2011. "Pronoun references to a deity worshiped

by people in the present are sometimes capitalized, although some writers use capitals only to prevent confusion: God helped Abraham carry out His law."
6. ^ a b c Quirk, Randolph; Greenbaum, Sidney; Leech, Geoffrey; Svartvik, Jan (2008) [1985]. A Comprehensive Grammar of the English language. Index by David Crystal. Longman. pp. 314–318. ISBN 978-0-582-51734-9.
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