A tiny companion to the lonely indexical *we*

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November 1, 2016

Abstract

The plural (indexical) pronoun *we* may well be the most neglected word in the entire philosophy of language canon. For lack of a better remedy, in this paper I go through a number of puzzling uses of *we* and put forward a minimal semantics along with a more intricate pragmatics for the plural indexical. In brief, I claim that the plural indexical *we* has a meaning very similar to bare plurals, and that its more puzzling 'imposter' readings are contextually derived from the minimal ('bare plural') semantics via an expressivity principle, principles of coherence, and world knowledge. I also introduce an alternative explanation based on a grammatical view.

The pronoun *we*, if we are to believe frequency dictionaries, is among the most common words. In English it makes the top 25, occupying a position not far behind top contenders like *the*, *he* and *I* but ahead of other philosophical favourites like quantifiers, modals and the conditional *if*. For all its pervasiveness in ordinary speech, we philosophers of language managed to avoid the plural pronoun.[1] Still, the pronoun has several highly intriguing linguistic properties, which show up in a number of significant linguistic practices. Laying out these properties is the task of the next two sections. I then follow with an explanation and an outline a fuller account of *we*. In the end, what I hope to have accomplished is a better—and more concrete—understanding of the meaning of the plural pronoun.

Plural imposters

As Jespersen (1933, 158) once noted, the plural form of the pronoun *I* does not work as the plural of the noun *horse*, since the plural *horses* typically includes multiple horses while the plural *we* does not typically include multiple speakers. But if *we* is different from other nominal plurals, what does it mean?

[1] To the best of my knowledge, the only exception in the recent philosophical literature in English is Cavell's (1976) discussion of the ordinary language philosophers' appeal to what *we ordinarily say and mean*, with the associated normative and descriptive aspects. For reasons of space, in this essay I will be focusing on the descriptive side of *we*'s meaning.

A natural extension of the standard semantics[2] for singular first person indexicals to plural ones has it—in line with Jespersen's observation—that the plural *we* must refer not to groups of speakers but to groups that *include* the speaker (or, more generally, the agent of the context). Yet, should the speaker always be included among the referents of *we*? Do we always speak of ourselves (the speakers) when we say "we did this" or "we did that"? This inclusion requirement can be questioned. Consider:

(1) a. I hope that *we* are doing well today. (we = the hearer)
b. *We* are not very altruistic. (we $\neq$ the speaker or hearer)
c. *We* are going to argue against the ambiguity view. (we = the author)

In certain contexts, e.g. a nurse talking to a patient in (1a) or a speaker talking about her community in (1b), the intuitive reference of *we* does not include the speaker. To these oddities, we should add (1c), as written by the author of an academic paper. In the latter case, *we* seems to refer to a single individual—the speaker (cf. the so-called royal *we*).

Call such occurrences of *we* that exhibit an anomalous reference *plural imposters*. (I borrow the term *imposter* from Collins and Postal (2012), who have recently offered a syntactic treatment of imposters. The term is meant to capture a sense of pretence: imposter expressions are not what they seem to be, carrying hidden person and number features.) An account of the plural pronoun *we*, I would like to suggest, should have something to say about plural imposters, whether it explains them away or incorporates them in the theory.

Before launching into any of these projects, we need to distinguish imposterhood from other phenomena.

First, other plural forms with singular reference do exist but are much less anomalous than our imposters. One can certainly ask an acquaintance *Do you have sisters?* or invite one's friend's sisters to a party by saying *Everyone should invite his sisters*. The two utterances make sense even in situations in which each of the persons being addressed has exactly one sister, which means that in such contexts the plural *sisters* is atom-denoting (viz. has a single referent), and more generally that plurals are compatible with singular reference.[3] Plurals with singular reference are common in contexts of *uncertainty*, when (e.g.) questions would be in order. But, clearly, uncertainty does not motivate the utterances of plural imposters. The nurse who utters (1a) is by no means uncertain of the number of individuals that s/he is addressing. Speakers of imposter utterances know full well whether *we* refers to a single individual or to more than one individual. Another reason why plural imposters should be distinguished from more common atom-denoting plurals is that imposterhood is a more general referential anomaly: it includes not only atom-denoting *we* (like (1a,c)) but also cases (like (1b)) in which the speaker is not included in the reference of the pronoun.

[2] A semantics put forward in Kaplan (1989).

[3] See Krifka (1989) and Sauerland et al (2005) for one kind of account that accommodates atom-denoting plurals, and Farkas and de Swart (2010) for an alternative account and an overview of the theories of plurals. In the philosophical literature, Oliver and Smiley (2013) also seem to building their theory on the assumption that plurals are compatible with singular denotation.

Second, since we are dealing with plurals, we should make sure that intuitions about imposters do not interfere with intuitions concerning the collective versus distributive distinction. A predicate predicated of a plurality has a distributive reading if it can be predicated of each member of the plurality taken separately, and has a collective reading if it can only be predicated of the plurality as a whole. For instance, *The strongmen lifted a rock* may entail that each of the strongmen lifted a rock (the distributive reading) or that they lifted a rock together (the collective reading).

Now, what collective readings and imposter readings have in common is their exclusion of the speaker, in certain circumstances, from the extension of certain (different) predicates. But the similarities end here. Collective readings may exclude the speaker from the extension of a distributive predicate, while imposter readings may exclude the speaker from *any* kind of predicate (whether distributive or collective).

Suppose that we, the participants to this conversation, met at a conference, and that I have just reminded you of our meeting. We know that *meet* is a verb that induces a collective reading of the sentence—a singular individual cannot meet full stop —so the subject matter of my utterance is that we, all together, met at the conference in question. The predicate *meet* is collective. Yet even if we accept that the members of our group are not to have individually the non-sensical meet-property, we can still ask which of us have the collective property. What is the constituency of 'our' group? In the present example it is clear that the speaker (viz. myself) is part of the group whose members met at a conference. But in other circumstances the question does not get as easily settled. Say, for instance, that our universities' football teams played each other in the last year's tournament, and I put this to you by uttering *We played each other last year*. It is relevant to ask whether, in such a context, the speaker or indeed the audience is included among the players, or whether they were just associated with them in some other manner. And the question as to whom we should include in our group is relevant for uncovering imposter readings of the plural pronoun *we*, whether or not the sentence as a whole also receives distributive or collective interpretations.

We versus I

If our previous observations about *we* are on the right line, then plural indexicals seem to have a more irregular behaviour than the corresponding singular indexicals. In typical conversational situations, the singular indexical *I* must somehow pick out the speaker, while the plural indexical *we* need not. Consequently certain inferences go through trivially with *I*, but not with *we*. For instance, the following inferences are non-trivial (if not outright invalid), for we can easily imagine contexts where they are false:

(2) a. If *we* [= the philosophers] knew/believed p, then I knew/believed p.
b. If *we* [= the Western world] bombed Iraq, then I bombed Iraq.
c. If *we* [= the baby] fall asleep, then I fall asleep.[4]

[4]This example is constructed on the model of Siewierska's (2004, 215) example (1c). See also her (1b)

As social epistemologists often point out, a group may satisfy an epistemic property, e.g. knowing *p*, even if not all of its members have that epistemic property.[5] The immediate consequence for plural pronouns, as shown by (2a), is that such pronouns pick out groups whose members—e.g. the speaker—may fail to know certain things, even if the group as a whole has the relevant knowledge. The effects of singular indexicals are rather insignificant in comparison. Singular indexicals make the inference trivial: once we substitute the singular indexical for the plural, what we get is the uninteresting *if I know that p, I know that p*. The same contrast shows up in non-epistemic contexts. In (2c), if *we* is used in an affectionate manner, say by a parent about their infant, it will not follow that the parent fell asleep. So the utterance will come out as false in that context. Same goes for (2 b). At the same time, the singular indexical versions of (2b-c) are, once again, trivial.

Another consequence of *we*'s imposterhood is that *we* and *I* have different modal profiles. On the Kaplanian semantics, *I exist* is true in every context of utterance, since individuals can speak only if they exist, but it will be easy to falsify at contexts of evaluation that differ from the context of utterance—say contexts of evaluation whose time coordinate is set a hundred years from the time of the utterance context. In contrast, *We exist* will be in general more *difficult* to falsify as evaluated in contexts other than the utterance context, since, to begin with, how do we decide when a group is extinct? Surely, we—my family, say—may exist at some future time even if I cease to exist in the meantime.

But the difficulty is not just a matter of indeterminacy. Consider the contrasting truth values of the following singular and plural indexical statements.

(3) Context: a president addressing the parliament
    a. In a hundred years *I* will (still) be here speaking about the enemies of democracy.
    b. In a hundred years *we* will (still) be here speaking about the enemies of democracy.

As you can see, the plural indexical is quite flexible, giving rise to a larger range of truths about the world than its singular counterpart. If the plural pronoun *we* picks out individuals that satisfy a certain *property* (e.g. *being leaders of this country*), as I think it does, and the property in question determines different individuals at different contexts, then the denotation of *we* can be shifted much easier than that of *I*, and can be shifted in such a way as to make *we will (still) be here speaking …* true (as in the case of (3a)), quite unlike the similar sentence formulated in terms of the singular indexical, which will be false if evaluated in the same temporally distant context.

Some readers may remark that *we* in (3b) can easily pass Kaplan's (1989, 510) monstrosity test. Its content shifts with the context of evaluation (with the time of that context, in particular) and thus is not fixed once and for all by the context in which the utterance is being made. The observation is worth further development in relation to

which corresponds to our nurse *we* in (1a).

[5] See Goldman and Blanchard (2016).

imposters.[6] But in this paper I am concerned with a more general question about *we*'s denotation (or its broadly speaking context-sensitive linguistic meaning).[7] I would like to find out why the denotation of *we* is sometimes (properly) plural and sometimes singular, and why it sometimes includes the speaker and sometimes does not. In other words, what makes *we*-imposters linguistically possible?

This 'imposter' behaviour of *we* is puzzling enough to get us going.

Assumptions

What complicates the study of *we*'s meaning is that it involves not one but three phenomena. *We* is no only a pronoun, but also a plural with an additional indexical component.

I already set out to circumvent several issues regarding *we*'s indexicality, but I need to leave aside even more. An important question that remains unanswered here concerns the logic and metaphysics of plurals. Recently, Oliver and Smiley (2013) proposed a way to distinguish between theories of plurals according to whether or not such theories try to reduce plural phenomena to singular ones. One way of reducing plural denotation to singular denotation is to cast plural sentences as conjunctive chains of singular clauses. Another is to talk of singular sets of individuals instead of pluralities. Oliver and Smiley observe that the philosophical and linguistic traditions tend to be singularist, and then they argue that these traditions are wrong: there is such a thing as plural denotation, a basic semantic relation between a term and a number of individuals. In what follows, I will speak the language of the singularist, but I remain neutral with regards to what the real structure of the plural *we* is.

Moreover, insofar as the linguistic logical form of *we* is concerned, I will abstract away from concerns about what is the best (most explanatory, unified) representation of the plural pronoun's meaning. Two such concerns are worth mentioning: (i) whether plural pronouns are variables, properties, or quantifier phrases, and (ii) whether one of their constituents is a presupposition or conventional implicature or some other kind of implication. Deciding on these matters would bring us far beyond the discussion of referential anomalies that I find intriguing here. That said, I do assume—again for convenience— that *we* behaves like a variable with a presuppositional component.

[6] Podobryaev (2014) is doing exactly that, although he does not focus on the plural imposter *we*.

[7] By *denotation* I mean, very roughly, the context-sensitive linguistic meaning corresponding to Kaplan's character. However, the contexts will be richer than Kaplanian tuples, and should include at least the properties of salient individuals and some means to lift that into group descriptions. If we so construct the contexts, it becomes unappealing to think of these as purely linguistically encoded. Moreover, since I am not talking about the pronouns' interaction with intensional operators like propositional attitude verbs or temporal expressions, the context of utterance will always be the context of evaluation. I will sometimes slip in my terminology and talk about denotation as if it were the content, but this should not be a problem since there will always be a unique content corresponding to its (determining) character *in the intended context* for each of our *we*-sentences. So the ambiguity in the word *denotation* will come down to the ambiguity between a value and its characteristic function.

My third assumption is less innocent. I want the syntax of *we* and its ensuing semantics to be minimal, without unneeded parameters that are supposed to respond to our intuitions about meaning. The assumption is essentially a pragmatist one, along the lines of e.g. Collins (2007), Neale (2007), and Recanati (2004). A pragmatic view will emphasise pragmatic mechanisms rather than syntactic and semantic ones, thus freeing the grammar (narrowly speaking) from special purpose mechanisms meant to deal solely with the specific phenomena at hand. Instead, pragmatic strategies promise to be more general than syntactic-and-semantic ones, and trade the promise of generality for what they see as easy but ultimately unmotivated fixes at the level of logical form. But in contrast to most pragmatist views, I do not assume a Gricean framework to deal with referential anomalies and other extra-semantic phenomena. My preferred view is a coherentist one, which I will develop later. My caveat here is, in brief, that there are two implicit threads about pragmatics—concerning the extent of its domain as well as its proper statement—that I am unable to pursue in this essay, although they do motivate my view of *we*.

Keeping these assumptions in mind, we can now state several properties that the plural pronoun *we* does seem to have. I start with its semantics (in the next section), then turn to some observations about the types of readings of *we* (in section 5), devoting the final sections (§§6-7) to the pragmatics.

Semantics

What is the simplest semantic view of *we* that accommodates both the basic observation that first-person indexicals refer to speakers as well as the observation, prompted by our prime examples in (1), that there is such a thing as plural imposterhood—namely, the anomalous reference of *we* to (single or plural) individuals that may differ from the speaker?

The simplest semantic response to this seemingly inconsistent demand should be the following. *We* does not refer to a group of speakers but, more plausibly, to the speaker's group. Since the actual individuals referred to may not include the speaker, it will be more accurate to say that *we* denotes a suitable *subgroup* of the speaker's group. For concreteness, I propose the following semantic representation:

(4) $[\![\textit{we}]\!] = \lambda x \in D_{pl} \subseteq g(s)\ .\ x$

where $\subseteq$ may be read as the *part of* relation over groups or as set-theoretic inclusion over sets of individuals in the group. The interpretation just proposed is slightly abusing the notation, but the intuition behind it should be clear: if a group is part of another group, then the set of members of the latter group includes the set of members of the former group. (As I said, it is not essential at this preliminary stage whether *we* really functions like a variable and whether the inclusion condition is a presupposition, although, to be sure, my representation of its meaning adopts both these properties.)

The function g is an *association* or *group* function that yields the group of associates of

a person in a context (cf. Kratzer (2009)). The function is given contextually, so g is actually a variable that ranges over such functions. There should be further constraints on the shape of the group function and on how it is determined. We will come to the relevant constraints later.

So the pronoun *we* involves a relation—determined by g—between the speaker and others.

If g is part of the semantics, we should expect to find cases where it applies to individuals other than the speaker. And indeed we do. Moravcsik (2003) argues that languages such as Hungarian and Japanese have what linguists call *associative plurals*, formed from a noun phrase and its suffix, the associative plural particle. Thus in Hungarian e.g. *Péter-ék* comes to mean Peter and his close associates. The suffix *-ék* denotes g which takes Peter as argument to yield Peter's group.

The simple semantics proposed in (4) models the denotation of *we* on a standard interpretation of bare plurals, which arguably do not exclude any kind of individual from their plural extension; e.g. *books* may mean any singular book or any combination of singular books (cf. fn. 3). Crucially, the semantics is compatible with the striking (imposter) examples discussed earlier. Speakers can legitimately exclude any particular individual from *we*'s reference, including themselves. In our terms, there are uses of *we* that do not include all the members of the speaker's group, as some of its members can be left out of the speaker's sub-group. Even the speaker, in particular, can be left out.

So the inclusion of the speaker will not be part of the truth conditions for sentences containing the plural *we* in such contexts, although it will be a presupposition—or implicature—that the speaker is included in a larger group (viz. his or her group rather than the subgroup). In certain contexts, other members of the speaker's group may fail to be included in the sub-group making up the denotation of *we*. When Bill says *We won 121 medals at the Rio Olympics*, this *we*, read literally, does not include Bill, or most of his fellow Americans, but just their national team.[8]

Indeed what our semantics entails is that *we* means something like *some of the speaker's associates perhaps all* or, alternatively, *any part of the speaker's group*. The proposal might seem to be missing something, since in a sense *we* refers to a whole plurality rather than some part of it. For instance, in the previous Olympics example, Bill may be interpreted as saying that *all* members of the speaker's group—all Americans—won the medals in some special sense, call it winning-by-proxy. The emerging figurative reading is a viable alternative to the one I proposed, on which some (and perhaps all) of Bill's associates won. And yet the figurative reading is not incompatible with our semantics. It appears to be problematic only if we consider the semantics in isolation of a productive pragmatics.

We certainly need some pragmatic constraints on such a bare-bones semantics. I said that members of the speaker's group *may* not be included in the plural entity denoted by the first person plural pronoun, but I haven't said why they are not *in fact* included

[8] Kratzer (2009, 225, fn. 27) produces a similar example and credits Satoshi Tomioka for it.

in that plural entity on a particular occasion. In order to understand why an individual is included (or excluded) from the denotation of the plural pronoun, I need to draw a divide between two types of imposters, which can then be handled by different pragmatic means.

Expressive and generic imposters

Part of the problem in deciding whether the plural pronoun *we* is picking out the whole speaker's group or part of it can be traced back to the pronoun's generic character. Generics are precisely the kind of expression having shifty inclusion conditions. We seem be able to utter many generic truths about mosquitoes, among which we can mention: Mosquitoes carry malaria, mosquitoes lay eggs, and mosquitoes are annoying. But only a tiny fraction of all the mosquitoes actually carry malaria.[9] Much more lay eggs (the female mosquitoes), and the annoying mosquitoes fall somewhere in the middle (the mosquitoes that have contact with humans). Notice that the same shifty inclusion conditions carry over to plural pronouns as well. Were a mosquito able to talk, it might very well assert the previous propositions about its own group using the first person plural pronoun: *we carry malaria*, *we lay eggs*, and, in full honesty, *we are annoying*. And it would be perfectly good fable talk. In more mundane cases, people can certainly utter sentences of the same generic character about their own groups.

So, I contend, part of the problem about the range of individuals included in the reference of *we* is to be solved by adopting a view of generics. I will say more about the generic solution in the next section. The generic strategy will not solve all our problems though, since we have plural imposters which are non-generic but still referentially anomalous. Among such cases are the nurse *we* referring to the addressee, the parental *we* referring to their infant, and the authorial *we* referring to a work's single author. These uses are not generic. (All of them except the authorial *we* are, in fact, expressive, as we will see shortly.) Two strategies might prove promising in tackling these cases. First, we may see these occurrences of *we* as lexical specialisations associated with the sound form /wiː/ that get to have other person features (namely, second and third person) or other number features (namely singular), despite their first person plural appearances. Alternatively, we may see them as pragmatically derived from contextual information in a way that constrains the previous semantics to groups of single referents.

No matter which strategy we espouse, we can adopt an independent—and theory-neutral—generalisation about the singularly referring *we*. The generalisation turns on the expressive character of such plural imposters:

[9] What I have to say about generic *we* agrees with most of the observations about nominal generics made by e.g. Leslie (2008), Leslie (2015), Sterken (2015), Pelletier and Asher (2012) except—and this is no small matter—for the apparent commitment of these authors to the claim that generic forms (quantifiers, generalisations, indexical variable etc.) are part of the logical form of bare plurals with generic readings. Keep in mind that the extant accounts of generics were not designed to tackle generic *we*, so it is not obvious how to extend these accounts to plural pronouns, and how different our accounts of generic *we* will end up being.

(5) *The expressive generalisation*: Marginally acceptable readings are promoted to being acceptable if they convey expressive meanings (viz. meanings that reflect the speaker's attitude about the truth conditional content of the utterance).

The gist of the expressive generalisation is that expressives generate acceptable and communicatively useful readings out of marked uses of noun phrases. Noun phrases can be marked either grammatically, due to having an atypical or dispreferred combination of features, or pragmatically, due to the existence of more natural ways of expressing the same contents. The expressive generalisation says that marked utterances will pass as acceptable if they meet expressive purposes, conveying the speaker's attitude about the content of her speech act.

The expressive pattern shows up in a number of examples involving pronouns, names, and definite descriptions. Some of these examples will sound familiar.

(6) a. *Nixon* [= speaker] is not going to kick around any more.[10] (expressing self-importance)
b. *Mummy* [= speaker] is going to buy *Johnny* [= addressee] ice cream.[11] (expressing affection)
c. How are *we* [= addressee (patient)] today? (expressing sympathy)
d. *We* [= third person (infant)] fell asleep.[12] (expressing affection)
e. Max actually paid the lawyer who had almost brought *the idiot* [= Max] to ruin.[13] (expressing disdain)

There is something referentially odd about these sentences: it is the very anomaly characteristic of imposters. This referential anomaly, I claim, is indirectly and yet intimately connected to the sentences' expressive content, which is in turn determined by the expressive content of the italicised noun phrases in each of the sentences.

The persons uttering (6a-e) can get away with an anomalous type of reference if their referents meet certain conditions. If Nixon himself uttered (6a), as apparently he did, the properly informed audience would understand the sentence as referring to the speaker (viz. Nixon) and not to a person other than the speaker. Likewise, if a mother said (6b) the audience would not fail to recognise that *mummy* refers to the speaker. The two utterances are anomalous insofar as they do not use first person pronouns, which are simpler devices that convey the same propositions. I have already remarked that the reference of the pronouns *we* in (6c-d) is anomalous: these are precisely the atom-denoting 'nurse' and 'parental' uses of the plural pronoun that I found puzzling at the beginning.

Finally note that in (6e) *the idiot* succeeds in referring back to Max even if other definite descriptions would fail at the same task in similar sentences. Suppose, for instance, that Max is wearing a blue suit. Then replace *the idiot* with *the man wearing a blue*

[10] Cf. Collins and Postal (2012)
[11] Cf. Collins and Postal (2012)
[12] Cf. Siewierska (2004, 215)
[13] See Corazza (2005) for similar data; in fact the expressive generalisation (5) can be viewed as a generalisation of the observations made by Corazza regarding—what I elsewhere called—third person specificity imposters.

suit in (6e). What we get is a sentence that is infelicitous and referentially anomalous. In effect, it is infelicitous to utter *Max actually paid the lawyer who had almost brought the man wearing a blue suit to ruin*, since the sentence offers no apparent reason for referring to Max as the man wearing a blue suit.

We can see these sentences as exhibiting different (but overlapping) kinds of imposter utterances. They exhibit person-imposters (in (6a-d)), number-imposters (in (6c-d)) and anaphoric-imposters (as they do in (6e) and, arguably, in (6a-d) if we broaden our understanding of anaphora). What I want to ask here is not so much why the expressions italicised in (6) are imposters (for the question would take us beyond the plural pronoun *we*), but rather, assuming that they truly are imposters in some sense of the term, what is the common feature among such referentially anomalous expressions. The expressive generalisation gives us the answer.

Our generalisation entails that some imposter noun phrases convey expressive contents. The sentences in (6), in particular, do not merely communicate truths about their referents, e.g. Nixon, the mother, the patient etc. but at the same time they express the speaker's attitude towards those referents (indicated in (6) parenthetically). The latter attitudes constitute expressive contents. As Potts (2007) has pointed out, expressive attitudes are difficult to paraphrase exactly. Meanwhile it is possible to paraphrase them inexactly but still good enough for ordinary communicative purposes. Indeed we often interpret people referring to themselves in the third person as egocentric or self-important. And we do interpret nurse *we* as expressing sympathy, and sometimes as misplaced sympathy. Self-importance, sympathy and the like are all expressive attitudes. [14]

So expressivity and markedness co-occur in certain imposter sentences. Why they co-occur may have either a simple explanation or a deeper one. The simple explanation is grammatical: expressive imposters just are marked pronouns, which have the form of plural pronouns but are in fact singular. If the (expressive) imposter *we* is in fact a singular pronoun in disguise, our initial puzzlement is due to our missing the ambiguity associated with the (orthographic or phonological) form of the word *we*. On the simple explanation then, the pronoun *we* is just ambiguous between a very typical reading and a marked one.[15] (The grammatical explanation is not tied to the semantics provided earlier, which was especially designed to be compatible with cases of singular reference via the notion of a sub-group of the speaker's group. On the grammatical explanation, singular reference is a grammatical projection from the singular feature of *we*.)

In contrast, the deeper explanation has it that there is a common syntax and semantics for *we*, but for pragmatic reasons the pronoun comes to have singular readings in certain contexts. It's time to say a bit more about the pragmatic strategy in view of articulating the much needed complement to our semantics.

[14]The expressive generalisation may be seen as an instance of the broader pragmatic principle that what's expressed atypically (e.g. singular reference with plural forms) should be interpreted atypically (e.g. expressively). Cf. Levinson's (2000) M-implicature.

[15]This kind of explanation seems to be preferred by most linguists that worked on the topic, e.g. Jespersen (1933), Portner (2005), and Collins and Postal (2012).

Coherence

I will interpret the imposter *we* within a coherence framework. Coherence relations (also known as rhetoric relations) are discourse relations connecting sentences or the propositions they express. One such relation is dependence. If a colleague tells you *Tom insulted Lurch and got fired* you may deduce that Tom's firing (causally) depends on his insulting Lurch. Crucially, the dependence is not explicitly expressed, but we competent speakers nevertheless infer it. The basic contention of the coherence account is that we always interpret discourses in light of the coherence relations that the discourse's sentences may implicitly instantiate. And if we (the audience) find a coherence relation that is also plausible according to our world knowledge, then we won't fail to (defeasibly) conclude that this coherence relation is a key part of what the speaker meant to communicate. Coherence relations are pragmatic means of strengthening the informational content of one's discourse. The task of the hearer is to infer the strongest plausible set of coherence relations from a given utterance, while the task of the speaker is to make sure that the hearer's inference is forthcoming under the current circumstances.[16]

Apart from dependence, there are several other key coherence relations such as exemplification, generalisation, and elaboration. The generalisation relation is particularly relevant here.

The generic *we*, I submit, is just an instance of an inferred generalisation. Generalisation is a later (extraneous) insertion in the logical form of a sentence. Generalising over *we* sentences can be pictured as follows. What we may call the restrictor of *we*—the predicate occupying the position of X in *we* X—is anaphorically determined given the salient predicate that the speaker satisfies or can be assumed to satisfy. If an American individual is speaking, saying (e.g.) *We are good at marketing*, then when we look back to figure out who the pronoun *we* might refer to (and thus what the pronoun *we* anaphorically depends on), we find a salient predicate, namely *(being) American*. Using the salient predicate to build the required plural denotation, we get that the intended message must be that Americans are good at marketing. More precisely, what we will hear—in virtue of inferring a generalisation relation—is the generic message that Americans are *in general* good at marketing. In this way, Americans will be identified as the speaker's group, the function g will yield the American associates of the speaker, and the generalisation coherence relation will confer genericity on the statement.

In other words, g is constructed anaphorically from a salient predicate and can be further analysed as *the X associates of x*, where x is bound to the speaker of the context of utterance and X is bound to the contextually salient property *(being) American*.[17]

[16] Cf. Asher and Lascarides's (2003, 21) principle called maximise discourse coherence. See also Pagin (2014) for a way to develop the notion of strength of coherence relations. Other notable coherence theorists are Hobbs (1979) and Kehler (2002). Note that the terminology differs slightly from author to author: e.g. what I call dependence is called explanation in other works.

[17] I'm having in mind a more general notion of anaphora, in the sense that not only third person nominals can be bound but also indexicals and demonstratives, and other definites introduced by ostension. We can see the indexical *I* as bound to the speaker of the actual situation/event (of utterance), the tense as bound to the time of the actual speech situation, and the ostensively introduced definite as bound to the object

So the previous message can be made more explicit by uttering *We Americans are good at marketing*.[18] Since the latter sentence lends itself to a generalisation, we infer that it in effect expresses a generalisation relation (viz. a coherence relation) between one's being American and one's being good at marketing. A generalisation, as far as plural pronouns are concerned, conveys a proposal to extend the sub-group (e.g. some Americans) as much as it is contextually possible towards reaching the upper bounds represented by the speaker's group (e.g. all Americans). Sometimes we can push the boundary of the sub-group all the way up to the speaker's group only at the cost of weakening what we predicate about it, and thus weakening the generalisation itself. Recall our figurative interpretation of the American uttering *We won 121 medals at the Rio Olympics*. If we interpret the sentence as a full blown generalisation we are forced, on pain of assuming that our speaker is untruthful, to weaken the verb *win* to something like *win by association*. (Even so, the proposition conveyed would be a weak generalisation rather than a strong, law-like one. The verb's past tense precludes it from holding at all times.)

The coherence strategy can account for the referential properties of expressive readings of *we* as well. I said that there are two ways to account for such readings: a syntactic account and a pragmatic one. On my favourite (pragmatic) account, the anomalous referential properties of expressive *we* are determined by the same coherence mechanism along with a plausibility relation grounded in world knowledge.

Apropos *plural* pronouns, the thrust of the coherentist view is that if we find coherent and plausible reasons against introducing certain people in the speaker's sub-group (of the group that is made available by the semantics), we will not consider such persons to be part of the speaker's sub-group. Recall the situation of the parent talking about their infant. If this parent, say the mother, tells her partner *We have just fallen asleep*, her partner has a good reason to exclude her—the speaker—form the speaker's sub-group giving the denotation of *we* (since, after all, she is alert and speaking). Then knowledge of the associates of the speaker and about the surrounding environment in which the utterance was made excludes the rest of the sleeping world from the denotation of *we*, leaving her partner with the close family, and indeed with a single individual—the kid.

Missing from this picture is the role of the expressive generalisation in finding a referent. If we are indeed equipped with an expressive generalisation, such a principle would help to further narrow down the range of plausible individual referents in the speaker's group, since the speaker must have some expressive attitudes towards those individuals, and we can only expect that such expressive attitudes, e.g. a mother's affection, are unevenly distributed over the salient individuals in any given context. [19]

demonstrated in the actual speech situation. For similar views, see e.g. Hunter (2014), Schlenker (2005), and Bittner (2012).

[18] In this sentence, *American* does not simply restrict the set of entities denoted by *we* but rather completely specifies it. We do not expect to have entities that fall under *we* but are non-American. So *American* is a non-restrictive (rather than restrictive) modifier of *we*. See Kratzer (2009) for further suggestions about the role of g in relation to non-restrictive modification.

[19] In fact the efficacy with which expressives pick out their referents and guide our referential interpretations may have to do with the fact that in normal circumstances we will have very few individuals we may take expressive attitudes towards.

The inferred coherence structure of the imposter sentence *We have just fallen asleep* will make reference to the expressive generalisation. The father (viz. the addressee) may formulate his coherence-driven interpretation in the following fashion. She (viz. the speaker) cannot talk about people in town *because* it would be inconsequential and irrelevant to talk about people in general (it does not answer any question that should concern us) and there is *no reason* to associate with people in town anyway (yet *we* expresses association via the group function g). She cannot talk about herself or myself *because* this would be plainly false or highly implausible. So she is talking about our kid Johnny, affectionately. In other words she must be talking about Johnny *because* she gives voice to an expressive attitude or, alternatively, she expresses that attitude *because* she is talking about Johnny.[20]

Words like *reason* and *because* signal coherence relations, and in particular dependence relations of different flavours (e.g. epistemic or factual) and strengths (e.g. necessary, plausible, or merely possible).[21] Setting aside the intricate semantics of dependence relations, the general strategy of interpreting imposters is this. The audience grasps the (anomalous) referential intentions of the speaker by embedding them into a network of relations, thus finding a solution to the problem of maximising the coherence and plausibility of the ensuing discourse. On some occasions, there may be multiple coherent networks against which to evaluate the speaker's utterance, in which case the utterance remains ambiguous *unless* one such network is more plausible than the other(s).

In principle, the ambiguity underlying the expressive *we* may have its origin either in the pragmatics or in the grammar, and the coherence strategy is relevant in both cases. The coherence strategy is equally open to the adept of the grammatical view (as to the pragmatist), for the grammatically ambiguous expression must be somehow disambiguated, and grammar on its own cannot do the disambiguation for us. One might think in the same terms about generic imposters. Perhaps there too the pragmatic and grammatical strategy fare equally well. But there is a caveat. The coherence strategy does different theoretical jobs in the generic and expressive cases, since in the generic case the genericity of *we* follows from the application of the generalisation coherence relation sanctioned by world knowledge, while in the expressive case we also need the expressive generalisation (which may be claimed by both the pragmatist and the grammatical theorist). The different theoretical weights of coherence in the analysis of the generic and expressive imposters should be reflected in our stance towards the grammatical (ambiguity) strategy. This is far from a definitive argument in favour of coherence-driven pragmatism regarding *we*, but just a way of pointing out that

[20] In fact the latter coherence relation (viz. epistemic dependence)—between the presumed fact that the mother conveys an expressive attitude about a content and the presumed fact that the content is Johnny—can go both ways because the coherence-driven pragmatic inference is not a matter of deduction based on firm premisses (or at least not always) but rather it is an inference to the best explanation in which thoughts may support each other at the same time. Cf. coherentist accounts of knowledge such as Haack (1993) and Thagard (2000, 41ff.).

[21] I am thinking of dependence-denoting words in terms of Kratzer's (1977) distinction between the two kinds of constraints on a modal's meaning, namely a restrictor on the possible worlds domain of quantification (epistemic, factual etc.) and an ordering source on that domain (expressing e.g. stereotypical orders, deontic preference etc.). I am drawing this connection in another paper.

the pragmatic and grammatical strategies seem to differ in both explanatory power (e.g. coherence suffices to explain generic imposters and makes the grammatical strategy redundant) and their explanatory targets (e.g. the grammatical strategy explains the presence of ambiguities but not also their resolution).

Group constraints

In discussing an earlier example, we concluded that if the context makes it clear that an American person is speaking, then the speaker's group will be the inclusive group of Americans (including the speaker). Determining the group at issue is a matter of defeasible generalisation from contextual cues—from the properties we know, or can infer, the speaker has.

What sort of relation are we talking about? Is it simply a contingent relation like the relation exhibited by, say, me and Abdul and Kaon (three people randomly chosen to form a group), or a stronger one like the relation among the members of a family or political party?

Moravcsik (2003) argues that both associative plurals—like the Hungarian *Péter-ék* referring to Peter and his close associates—and the plural pronoun *we* share a special kind of plurality as denotation. She distinguishes between plural-denoting nominals like *guests* and *family*. The former denotes a plurality that just happens to fall under a concept. It is contingent that certain people received an invitation and honoured it; these people may have nothing else in common except for being mentioned in the invitation list. She calls these expressions *type plurals* to emphasise that all they have to share is a type, e.g. `guest`. In contrast, in the case of what Moravcsik calls *group plurals*, the individuals that form a family are part of a cohesive whole, with precisely defined kin relations between them. Moravcsik (2003, 488ff) then argues that associative plurals and plural *we* are group plurals.

Setting associative plurals aside, Moravcsik's generalisation is disputable insofar as it concerns the plural pronoun *we*. It should be clear that *we* does not always denote group plurals, if by that we understand a plurality consisting of individuals with specific functions and relations among them. For surely when I ask Abdul and Kaon, who happen to be in the same room with me, to do me a favour and help me carry the piano, I can use *we* without assuming any particular relation (hierarchical or otherwise) between us. Thus, when I am just saying *Abdul and Kaon, can we please move the piano*, the *we* in this utterance does not denote a cohesive group, but an ad hoc one.

It is true that in many cases, *we* is used to denote a cohesive whole, such as a political party, law firm or family.[22] But this just means that the group picked out by the plural pronoun, the group of associates, comes with the relational structure built in. In other

[22]Indeed, some contextual uses of *we* will come to pick out a group agent, in Petit's (2014) sense (viz. as a plural entity whose acts are purposive and guided by reliable representation of the environment), and yet this is not a reason to believe that the lexical meaning of *we* encodes agency; animacy plus the group parameter suffice, as far as grammar is concerned.

words, it is not the syntax or semantics of the plural pronouns that mandates that the group determined by the function g should be cohesive. Rather it is the contextual setup that makes available a group with cohesive structure, as opposed to a contingent one. This is a fortunate situation, since it means we can keep the syntax and semantics of English group-denoting pronouns minimal, without, for that matter, having to overburden the pragmatics—no special syntactic/semantic constituency or pragmatic principle is called for to make sense of such phenomena.

The same observation carries over to other special readings of *we*. Recall Jespersen's observation that while *I* refers to the speaker, *we* does not refer to a *group* of speakers. There is an exception to this otherwise general rule. In choral utterances *we* does refer to a group of speakers. Think of Queen's song *We are the champions* sung by the winning curling team at the Winter Olympics. Is this group-of-speakers meaning of *we* the (or perhaps *a*) *semantic* meaning of the plural pronoun? I very much doubt it. There is no need to build the peculiarities of a group into the semantics of *we*. While it is true that *we* may end up referring to a group of speakers, this is only because the speaker's group happens to include all the other persons speaking in the same context. Otherwise put, if the group function g can be contextually developed into a function that picks out the salient associates of the speaker, we should let this additional task at the hands of pragmatics. The pragmatics delivers a meaning equivalent to *the X associates of x* with x bound to the speaker and X bound to the predicate *being a speaker*. Thus each token of *we* in a choral utterance context comes to mean the *speaking* associates of the speaker. [23]

Conclusion

I put forward a minimal semantics for the first person plural pronoun *we* that has the pronoun denote a sub-group of the speaker's group. The semantics is compatible with the diverse uses of the plural pronoun, but does nothing more. The sub-group of the speaker's group (viz. *we*'s denotation) is a plurality that consists of one or more individuals, whether or not they are cohesively organised. Among the readings made available by the semantics of *we*, there are anomalous ones—what I have called imposter readings—which involve both 'singular' pluralities and proper pluralities that do not include the speaker. There have to be special reasons for anomalous (imposter) reference. In my view, the reasons for anomalous reference are provided pragmatically by means of a mechanism that is geared towards maximising coherence under constraints of plausibility relative to the conversation participants' knowledge. Thus, generic readings of *we* are the result of a generalisation over instances of a predicate, itself salient in the context of utterance. The expressive readings are trickier. My hypothesis is that a certain expressive generalisation is at play in generating

[23] Alternatively, we can see the choral *we* as a unique joint utterance. If the choral *we* is not formed out of multiple individual utterances of *we*, but rather out of just one joint (collective) utterance of *we*, then we should say that this joint utterance picks out the speaker as one plural entity, as well as the associates of the plural speaker. This pragmatic reading remains a theoretical possibility as long as we accept that our minimal semantics for *we* can be freely modulated under coherence and plausibility restrictions.

expressive readings to the effect that marked (atypical) pronominals—which may be the manifestation of pragmatic or grammatical markedness—become acceptable if they express the speaker's attitude beyond and above expressing their regular truth conditional contents. The expressive generalisation plus coherence and plausibility seem to me good tools for understanding expressive uses. But I have not ruled out an ambiguity view of the plural *we*.

The main themes of this essay deserve further elaboration. To mention one important thread, on the present semantics it is natural to ask by what communicative means and resources do conversation participants determine the speaker's group and her sub-group, and how the ensuing patterns of association and dissociation evolve from context to context. As I suggested in relation to generic *we* the boundaries of the sub-group are negotiable, and it is arguable that this in turn depends on the expressive and/or normative power of association inherent in the plural pronoun *we*.[24]

The plural pronoun *we* brings out a number of topics that are actively researched in the philosophy of language and linguistics. At the same time, plural indexicals remain much less explored (and understood) than their singular kin. But the difference is, to a great extent, a mere historical accident, since there is no theoretical reason (tractability or importance for linguistic practices) to study *I* but not *we*. The two kinds of indexical fulfil different yet equally significant purposes: the significance of singular indexicals is that they provide the simplest means for identifying ourselves, while the significance of plural pronouns is that they are our simplest means of carving out our social world. In effect, plural indexicals (*we*, *you*, *they*) constitute our simplest linguistic device to divide people into those we associate with and those others we don't associate with (for the purposes at hand).

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[24]Equally important are some technical questions such as: how can anaphoric antecedents furnish a predicate to the function g, how can this be built into the group function so as to resemble non-restrictive modification? Is g, semantically speaking, a presupposition or a conventional implicature? How to extend accounts of genericity to account for the generic character of plural pronouns like *we* and *they*? How to extend well known accounts of expressives to expressive *we*? This will likely depend on or inform one's view of plural pronouns, whether one comes to think of them as variables or quantifiers or other kind of expression. We should further ask how accounts of singular imposters (e.g. *Nixon* in (6a)) are linked to plural imposters. Even more difficult are the questions regarding coherence; it remains to be settled how coherence relations can yield precise predictions about *we* and group cohesiveness.

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