

Chapter 4, Problem 10: Case and Coordination

There is considerable dialectal variation regarding case in English coordinate NPs. Many speakers express some uncertainty regarding their judgments, and some exhibit different patterns at different times. We describe three dialects.

Some speakers use the forms that are cited as prescriptively correct in the handbooks. This pattern assigns the same case to each conjunct of a coordinate NP as would be assigned to a non-coordinate pronoun in the same position. Hence, each conjunct of the subject of a finite verb is nominative, and conjuncts in all other positions are accusative. This dialect is illustrated in the following examples:¹

- (i) He and I left early.
- (ii) Pat saw him and me.
- (iii) Chris showed them him and me.
- (iv) Terry called to him and me.

Some speakers use only accusative forms in coordinate structures. For these speakers, evidently, nominative case is limited to NPs that are sisters to finite verb phrases. Examples (ii)–(iv) would be the same as in Dialect A, but example (1) would be changed to (v) or (vi).

- (v) Him and me left early.
- (vi) Me and him left early.

Some speakers use only nominative forms in coordinate structures. These speakers appear to have a disjunctive rule for the use of nominative case, namely, that it is used for subjects of finite clauses or for coordinate conjuncts. Example (i) would be unchanged in this dialect, but (ii)–(iv) would be rendered as (vii)–(ix):

- (vii) Pat saw he and I.
- (viii) Chris gave he and I a wink.
- (ix) Terry called to he and I.

Although we have not undertaken systematic study, we think that Dialect B is common among young children and other people with relatively little education. It may well be a pattern that is corrected in school, and Dialect C might originate as a hypercorrect reaction to the prescription against Dialect B. We hasten to add that we have not investigated this speculation. We suspect that most contemporary American English speakers employ some combination of the patterns illustrated in (i)–(ix), in some cases perhaps exhibiting different patterns depending on the person, number, and gender of the pronouns.

¹Reversing the order of the conjuncts in (i) makes it sound quite unnatural. We won't conjecture why.