

Pronouns

Introduction

- 6.1 Pronouns share several characteristics, most of which are absent from nouns. Their name implies that they 'replace' nouns, but we have already seen (2.44) that this is to a great extent a misnomer. It is best to see pronouns as comprising a varied class of closed-class words with nominal function. By 'nominal' here we mean 'noun-like' or, more frequently, 'like a noun phrase'. Semantically, a pronoun may be a 'pro-form' in any of the three senses illustrated in the following example:

Margot longed for a bicycle, and at last (C) *somebody* gave (B) *her* (A) *a brand new one*.

- (A) It may substitute for some word or phrase (as *one* may substitute for a noun, and therefore be a 'pronoun' in a quite literal sense).
- (B) It may signal, as personal pronouns like *her* do, that reference is being made to something which is given or known within the linguistic or situational context (cf 19.33f).
- (C) It may stand for a very general concept, so that its reference includes the reference of untold more specific noun phrases: *somebody*, for example, indicates a broad class of people including *a girl, a man, a secretary*, etc.

All three pronouns in italics in the example have this in common: their meaning in itself is general and undetermined; their interpretation therefore depends to an unusual extent on what information is supplied by context.

Syntactically, most pronouns function like noun phrases rather than nouns (cf 5.1). They combine in only a limited way with determiners and modifiers. We can say, indeed, that most pronouns, being intrinsically either definite or indefinite, incorporate their own determiner (cf 5.10ff). Contrast:

{ <i>the men</i>	{ <i>a tall man</i>
{ <i>*the they</i>	{ <i>*a tall he</i>

In addition, some pronouns have morphological characteristics that nouns do not have:

- (a) CASE: There is a contrast between subjective and objective cases: *I/me, she/her, who/whom*, etc (cf 6.2ff).
- (b) PERSON: There is a contrast between 1st, 2nd, and 3rd persons: *I/you/she*, etc (cf 6.6).
- (c) GENDER: There are overt grammatical contrasts between (i) personal and nonpersonal gender; and between (ii) masculine and feminine gender: *he/she/it*, etc (cf 6.8ff).
- (d) NUMBER: There are morphologically unrelated number forms, as in *I/we, he/they*, as opposed to the typical regular formation of noun plurals: *girl/girls*, etc (cf 6.11f).

These special distinctions associated with pronouns are found most notably in the class of PERSONAL PRONOUNS, which may be regarded, by reason of their frequency and their grammatical characteristics, as the most important

and central class of pronouns. Accordingly, it is to personal pronouns above all that we turn in exemplifying these characteristics. In the following sections we examine the categories of case, person, gender, and number in more detail, before proceeding to a consideration of the various classes of pronouns.

Case

Case forms

- 6.2 Nouns and most pronouns in English have only two case forms: COMMON case (*children, someone*) and GENITIVE case (*children's, someone's*). However, the five personal pronouns *I, we, he, she, they* and the *wh*-pronoun *who* have a further distinction between SUBJECTIVE and OBJECTIVE cases.

Table 6.2 Personal pronouns with subjective, objective, and genitive case forms

SUBJECTIVE	<i>I</i>	<i>we</i>	<i>you</i>	<i>he</i>	<i>she</i>	<i>it</i>	<i>they</i>	<i>who</i>
OBJECTIVE	<i>me</i>	<i>us</i>		<i>him</i>	<i>her</i>		<i>them</i>	<i>who(m)</i>
GENITIVE determinative independent	<i>my</i> <i>mine</i>	<i>our</i> <i>ours</i>	<i>your</i> <i>yours</i>	<i>his</i>	<i>her</i> <i>hers</i>	<i>its</i>	<i>their</i> <i>theirs</i>	<i>whose</i>

As Table 6.2 shows, there are additionally two genitive forms, a determinative and an independent form (cf 6.29), for five of the pronouns.

There is a merger (syncretism) of case forms in the following pronouns: the determinative genitive and objective forms of *she* are identical, and the subjective/objective distinction between *who* and *whom* is not always maintained (cf 6.35, 6.38). The personal pronouns *you* and *it* do not have distinct subjective and objective case forms (cf 6.14).

The genitive forms of the personal pronouns are, in accordance with grammatical tradition, called POSSESSIVE pronouns.

The use of case forms

- 6.3 The use of the possessive pronoun forms corresponds largely to that of the genitive of nouns (cf 5.112ff), except that the two different possessive forms, where they exist, function as determinative and independent genitives (cf 6.29). The latter are, in effect, 'true pronouns'.

The choice between subjective and objective cases is made on the basis of a pronoun's function in the clause. As their name implies, subjective personal pronouns function as subject and sometimes as subject complement; objective personal pronouns function as object, prepositional complement, and sometimes as subject complement.

Table 6.3 opposite shows that both subjective and objective case forms can be used as subject complement. Although the prescriptive grammar tradition stipulates the subjective case form, the objective form is normally felt to be the natural one, particularly in informal style. We shall now examine this overlapping use of case forms more carefully.

Table 6.3 Case functions of personal pronouns

FUNCTION	SUBJECTIVE CASE	OBJECTIVE CASE
subject	<i>He</i> was late.	
subject complement	It was <i>he</i> . <formal>	It was <i>him</i> . <informal>
object		I saw <i>him</i> .
prepositional complement		I gave it to <i>him</i> .

Subjective and objective cases

- 6.4 We have noticed in Table 6.3 a discrepancy between the use of case in formal and informal English. In the main, formal English follows the normative grammatical tradition which associates the subjective pronouns with the nominative case of pronouns in inflectional languages such as Latin, and the objective case with the oblique cases (especially accusative and dative cases) in such languages. Hence the subjective form appears not only in subject position, but in that of subject complement, and also in constructions where it can be postulated that the predicate has been ellipted, leaving a 'stranded' subject. This last, however, may have different realizations in the short response:

A: *Who* is there? B: $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{It's } I/me. \\ \text{(Only) } me. \\ Me - \text{John.} \end{array} \right\}$ [1]

He is $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{more intelligent than} \\ \text{as intelligent as} \end{array} \right\}$ *she* (is). [2]

But in response forms and comparative constructions, the subjective pronoun on its own, such as *she* in [2], sometimes gives a stilted impression, and it is preferable to add the operator after it: *she is*.

In contrast to the traditionally 'correct' use of the subjective form *It's I* in [1] and . . . *than/as she* in [2], informal usage favours the objective form:

A: *Who's* there? B: *Me*. [1a]

He is $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{more intelligent than} \\ \text{as intelligent as} \end{array} \right\}$ *her*. [2a]

We may say that, in informal English, *as* and *than* count as prepositions (and are therefore followed by an objective pronoun as prepositional complement) instead of counting as subordinating conjunctions (cf 9.4, 14.12).

- 6.5 This purely structural explanation, however, is not the whole story. To account for the general pattern of pronoun usage in informal style, it is reasonable to say that the traditional case distinctions do not operate here any more than they do with the genitive (cf 5.112ff). Instead, there is a broad division of the finite clause into 'SUBJECT TERRITORY' (the preverbal subject position) and 'OBJECT TERRITORY' (which includes all noun-phrase positions apart from that immediately preceding the verb). In informal English, that