Areas in the Use of Personal Pronouns in Standard English

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Introduction:

A pronoun is a term used in the grammatical classification of words, referring to the closed sets of items which can be used to substitute for a noun phrase (or single noun). There are many types of pronoun, with terminology varying somewhat between grammars. Personal pronouns include I, you, etc. in their variant forms (e.g. I/me); in their form my/mine the term possessive pronoun is often used. Other classes of pronoun regularly recognised include demonstrative pronouns, e.g. this/ that (in certain of their uses); interrogative pronouns, e.g., certain uses of who/which/what; reflexive pronouns, e.g. myself/yourself; indefinite pronouns, e.g. anyone/nobody; and relative pronouns, e.g. who/whom/that.

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Most pronouns replace noun or full noun phrases and can be seen as economy devices. Personal pronouns, for example, serve as pointers to neighbouring text (usually preceding text) or to the speech situation (Quirk et al., 1985: 335). Personal pronouns, moreover, can identify speakers and addressees. They have subjective, objective, and possessive forms and their main function is to create grammatical cohesion. Moreover, they are typically used as anaphors to NP antecedents. They refer either to nouns or full noun phrases anaphorically (backward) and cataphorically (forward).

Anaphoric reference: Look at the sun. It's going down quickly.

Cataphoric reference: It's going down quickly, the sun.

(Brown and Yule, 1983: 92)

Personal pronouns have different forms according to:

1. *Number:* singular, plural (e.g. I/we).

2. *Person:* first person, second person, third person (I/you/she)

3. *Case:* subjective, objective, possessive (I/me/mine)

4. *Gender:* masculine, feminine, neuter (he/she/it)

Personal, possessive and reflexive pronouns have distinctions of person:

		Personal Pronoun		Reflexive Pronouns	Possessive Pronouns
		Subject Case	Object Case		
1st person	Singular	I	me	myself	my mine
	Plural	we	us	ourselves	our ours
2nd person	Singular	you		yourself	your yours
	Plural			yourselves	
3rd person	Masculine	he	him	himself	his
	Feminine	she	her	herself	her hers
	Non- Personal	it		itself	its
	Plural	they	them	themselves	their theirs

(Quirk et al., 1973: 101-103)

Although personal pronouns are widely used by writers and speakers, they demonstrate a problematic area in syntax. So, when faced with a choice between two ways of saying the same personal pronoun, they assume that one of them must be the correct one – or at least must be the preferable one. Prescriptive 'rules' help to satisfy this need for a decision procedure; but grammar is so subtle and complicated that the 'rules' do not always lead to acceptable solutions. Hence, usage problems arise: problems of when we should or should not follow the rule, or problems of which rule to follow.

Now, we shall discuss some examples of these problems:

1. Pronoun Usage in Formal and Informal English:

Difficulties of personal pronoun usage occur because there is a considerable gulf between formal and informal English in the choice of pronoun forms. Formal written English follows the traditional Latin-based rules whereas informal spoken English follows its own rules, which are simple enough in their own terms. According to these rules, the subject pronoun is used in the normal subject position, preceding all or part of the verb phrase, whereas the object pronoun is used in other positions in the clause. This means that the object pronoun is the unmarked, neutral form in the pairs I/me, she/her, etc. even being used, for example, in unattached positions such as:

(1) How do you feel? <u>Me</u>? <u>I</u> feel fine.

(Leech et al., 1982: 177)

But with interrogative personal pronoun who/whom, it is the subject form which is normal since the wh-pronoun normally precedes the predicator, behaving in this sense like a subject:

(2) I want to see you. Who? <u>Me</u>? (ibid.)

2. Prescriptive Rules:

The main prescriptive rule for subject and object pronouns runs as follows:

44

(a) 'Use the subject pronouns I, he, she, we, they, who in the function of subject or complement': <u>I</u> am tired; <u>it</u> was <u>she</u> <u>who</u> spoke first.

(b) 'Use the object pronouns me, him, her, us, them, whom in the function of object or prepositional complement': Sarah saw <u>them</u>; His sister spoke to <u>us</u>. But (i) is frequently broken when the pronoun is a complement:

(3) Who's there? It's only <u>me</u>. (not: it's only I)

And (ii) is frequently broken in the case of pronouns after <u>but</u> as in:

(4) Nobody but her would do a thing like that. (More formal: Nobody but she…).

After <u>but</u>, we usually use object pronouns (me, him, etc.). Subject pronouns (I, he, etc.) are possible in a more formal style (Swan, 1980: 116).

Broughton (1990: 212) states that object pronouns are used in object position and prepositional complement:

(5) It had worn them apart.

(6) All four of <u>us</u> took hold of the line.

However, modern grammar prefers to regard 'as' and 'than' as occasional prepositions to sanction phrases like: as strong as <u>him</u>; better than <u>them</u>. For purists, anyhow, they relate the above

mentioned examples to ellipsis, in which the operator has been omitted. To avoid awkwardness, the subject forms are not used without the operator. So, they can be used either: as strong as <u>him</u>; better than <u>them</u>, or as a strong as <u>he</u> is; better than <u>they</u> are. However, the object pronoun is fully accepted as subject complement, particularly in response utterances:

(7) It's only me.

(8) It wasn't us.

(9) That'll be <u>him</u> at the door. (ibid.)

So, the use of the subjective form or the objective one has not been solved yet in language.

3. Pronouns with Ellipsis:

Ellipsis is most commonly used to avoid repetition. This is another difficulty stated by Leech et al. (1982: 175). In constructions with ellipsis, prescriptive grammar argues that the correct form to use is the one which would be appropriate if omitted words were restored: that is (10a) and (11a) are correct, rather than (10b) and (11b):

(10) **a.** Who sent this letter? I.

(10) **b.** Who sent this letter? Me.

(10) **c.** Who sent this letter? I did.

(11) a. She is as tall as he.

(11) b. She is as tall as him.

(11) c. She is as tall as he is. (ibid.)

But (10a) and (11a) are obviously unnatural and unidiomatic beside the 'incorrect' forms (10b) and (11b). Accordingly to 'our principle of desecration', this difficulty can be solved and the best thing to do is to evade the problem by using a construction without ellipsis as in (10c) and (11c).

Quirk et al. (1973: 332) state that ambiguity may arise in ellipsis as whether a remaining noun phrase is subject or object:

(12) He loves the dog more than his wife.

Here, a personal pronoun must be brought to replace a noun phrase to disambiguate this example:

(13) He loves the dog more than <u>she</u>.

(14) He loves the dog more than <u>her</u>.

Informally, however, the ambiguity would remain since 'than' plus the objective case tends to be used for (13) and (14) (ibid.)

4. Pronouns with Coordination:

The prescriptive rules are quite often broken in coordinated phrases like <u>you and me</u>, <u>him and her</u>.

(15) <u>You</u> and <u>me</u> must get together.

(16) The decision will have to be made by Christine and <u>I</u>.

(17) Susan has invited John and <u>I</u> to a party.

It is possible in (17) to use the object pronoun 'me' without affecting the meaning (Leech et al., 1982: 176). But the speakers of English who know the 'rules' find these examples quite blatant and excruciating violations. The examples in (15), (16) and (17), however, show the tangles and uncertainties which native speakers find themselves over the case of pronouns. It seems that examples like (15) occur naturally and spontaneously in informal English, while examples like (16) and (17), where the subject pronoun replaces the object pronoun, arise from the user's mistaken assumption that <u>I</u> is more correct than <u>me</u>. This assumption presumably made because of frequent correction of cases like (15). Such mistaken attempts to generalize a 'rule' are called hyper correction (ibid.).

5. Genitive and Object Pronouns:

Not all pronoun problems arise over choice between subject and object pronouns. There is also the problem of choosing between the object and genitive "possessive" forms in the subject position of (nominal –ing) clauses:

(18) He objected to [<u>our</u> winning both prizes].

(19) He objected to [us winning both prizes].

(Leech et al., 1982: 177)

Here, prescriptive grammar favours the genitive of (18). It is the commonest type of participle clause, that which has no subject as in:

(20) Telling lies is wrong.   (Quirk et al., 1973: 321).

When a subject is required, there is sometimes a choice which can be explained as follows:

(a)   Genitive case in formal style:

(21) I am surprised at his/ John's making that mistake.

(b) Objective or common case (for personal pronouns or nouns, respectively) in informal style:

(22) I am surprised at him/ John making that mistake.

It is commonly claimed that the genitive is the only "correct" form, but in fact it frequently has a stilted effect, and is particularly unsuitable when the subject is an inanimate or abstract noun phrase which would not normally take the genitive case, or a "group genitive phrase" as in:

(23) <u>The crisis</u> has arisen as <u>a result of recent uncontrolled inflation's</u> having outweighed the benefits of devaluation. (ibid.)

On the other hand, a pronoun in the objective case is disliked in subject position:

(24) Him being a Jesuit was a great surprise. (very informal)

Another difficulty in the use of personal pronoun may arise, especially when the human noun is replaced by a pronoun and the sex is not known, traditionally <u>he</u> is used rather than <u>she</u>.

(25) A martyre is someone who gives up <u>his</u> life for <u>his</u> beliefs.   (Leech and Svartvik, 1994: 57)

Another way of avoiding sex bias nowadays, well established in (spoken English), is singular use of <u>they</u>, as in:

(26) A martyre is someone who gives up <u>their</u> life for <u>their</u> benefits.

This 'ungrammatical' mixing of singular and plural is making its way into (informal) writing, although those with a strict sense of grammar avoid it.

But, <u>they</u> in this case may cause a problem and it is often possible to avoid the problem of sex neutral third-person reference by changing from the singular to the plural as in:

(27) Martyrs are people who give up <u>their</u> life/lives for <u>their</u> beliefs. (ibid.)

Problems with choosing masculine or feminine pronouns can often be avoided by using a plural rather than singular generic nouns as in:

(28) Students should always do <u>their</u> assignments. (Azar, 1998: 134).

A singular pronoun is informal English to refer to an indefinite pronoun as in:

(29) Somebody left <u>his</u> book on the desk.

But in everyday informal English, a plural personal pronoun is often used to refer to an indefinite pronoun as in:

(30) Everyone has <u>their</u> own ideas. (ibid.)

Quirk et al. (1973: 182) state that English has no sex neutral 3rd person singular pronoun, and so the plural pronoun <u>they</u> is often used informally, in defiance of number concord, as a substitute for the indefinite pronouns everyone, everybody, somebody, someone…etc.

(31) Everyone thinks <u>they</u> have the answer.

The plural pronoun is used to avoid the difficulty of whether to use the <u>he</u> or <u>she</u> form. But the use of <u>they</u> in the above sentence is

51

not agreed upon and it poses a problems in formal English, where the tendency is to use <u>he</u> as the "unmarked" form when the sex of the antecedent is not determined as in:

(32) Everyone thinks <u>he</u> has the answer.

Here, formal English has another alternative which is the device of conjoining both masculine and feminine pronouns:

(33) Every student has to make up <u>his</u> or <u>her</u> own mind. (ibid.)

6. Pronouns and the Problem of Number Concord:

The prescriptive rule of number concord in a finite clause is that the verb phrase agrees with the subject in terms of number (singular or plural) and person (first, second or third person). Except for the verb "be", subject-verb concord is limited to the present tense, and to the choice between the base form (e.g. walk) and the s-form (e.g. walks) of the finite verb (Biber et al., 2002: 232).

Although the rules for subject-verb concord are easy to state, in practice they are not always so easy to apply. Difficulties arise because 'singular' and 'plural' can be understood either in terms of form or in terms of meaning.

English has grammatical, notional and proximity concord. The former covers subject-verb agreement and pronoun reference agreement. The second involves semantic plurality, i.e., agreement

of the verb with the notion of plurality. The latter 'the proximity rule' is operative when coorelatives are used: the subject closest to the verb determines the number of the verb used.

As for notional concord (collective nouns) like government, committee, family the rule of concord is commonly disobeyed as in:

(34) The committee [has/have] met and [it has/ they have] rejected the proposal. (Quirk et al., 1973: 92)

The reference reflects a difference in attitude: the singular stresses the non-personal collectivity of the group and the plural the personal individuality within the group:

(35) The government have broken all their promises. (ibid.)

In this example, the government is treated as plural as shown by the use of the plural verb have and the pronoun their.

As for proximity concord, it denotes agreement of the verb with whatever noun or pronoun closely precedes it as in:

(36) No one except his own supporters agree with him.

(ibid.: 176)

(37) Either she or her friends are here.

Conclusions

Concerning personal pronouns there are many areas which confuse both the learners of English and teachers such as the use of these pronouns in formal and informal English, their use in coordination etc. Such areas are the source of conflict between linguists of different approaches (those following prescriptive or descriptive rules and formal or informal ones). Thus, this study shows that there are really some sorts of violations between the formal and informal usage of personal pronouns which have not yet been solved.

The study tackles the areas in which personal pronouns constitute problematic points throughout studying, teaching and learning English grammar particularly, personal pronouns such as the usage of these pronouns in formal and informal English, their use in coordination and with ellipsis.

It is recommended that syllabus designers, textbook writers, teachers and students should pay attention to such problems and try to overcome such obstacles when teaching and learning grammar.

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مخلص

جوانب من الصعوبات في استخدام الضمائر الشخصية في اللغة الإنكليزية

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يتعلق هذا البحث بالصعوبات التي تواجه المتعلمين أثناء تدريس أو تعليم الضمائر الشخصية وخاصة عند استخدامها في الحذف (ellipsis) والتطابق (coordination) ومن بين المشاكل التي يواجهها الطلبة والمدرسون في هذا المجال تخص استخدام الضمائر الشخصية في العامية والفصحى وكذلك مسائل تتعلق بحالات الإضافة والإعراب. وقد تم استخدام العديد من الأمثلة لتعزيز المعرفة لدى المتعلمين والمدرسين ولتفادي الوقوع في أخطاء نحوية أو لغوية.

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