

“Tell *us_{SG}* about it!”: A Deficient Indexical in British English

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1. Introduction

In British English, the oblique first person plural pronoun *us* can be used for first person singular reference. This is known as *singular “us”* (*us_{SG}*).¹ An example of *us_{SG}* is given in (1), an exchange between two speakers about the shape of charging cable ports.

- (1) A: There’s nowt worse than when they change a phone charger.
B: Tell *us_{SG}* about it! I had to succumb you know. Well, you know because you ordered it for *us_{SG}*.

This substituting of *us* for *me* is distributionally widespread; it appears in imperatives (2a), matrix and embedded declaratives (2b)-(2c), small clauses (2d), *wh*-questions (2e) and polar questions (2f). Moreover, as (1) also shows, it can be the complement of a preposition (2g).²

- (2) a. Give *us_{SG}* one minute.
b. I can tuck my hair into it [a hat] and it’ll protect *us_{SG}* from the sun.
c. I know you love *us_{SG}*. You don’t have to tell *us_{SG}* before you get on a plane.
d. It makes *us_{SG}* wanna die.
e. Where are they spitting on *us_{SG}*?
f. Can you do *us_{SG}* another thing as well?
g. It used to happen to *us_{SG}* when I was on The One Show now and then . . .

One previously noted restriction on *us_{SG}* is that it is phonologically deficient (Wright 1905), i.e., it cannot bear stress (3a). In addition, *us_{SG}* cannot be coordinated (3b), modified (3c), left-dislocated (3d), occur in isolation (3e) or appear after verb particle clusters (3f), making *us_{SG}* a prototypical *weak* pronoun (Cardinaletti & Starke 1994, 1999).

- (3) a. *Give **US_{SG}** one minute.
b. *I know you love {*us_{SG}* and Penelope} / {Penelope and *us_{SG}*}.
c. *You could have given yesterday’s *us_{SG}* a fiver for it, but now I want ten!
d. **us_{SG}*, ask for more than a fiver for it? Never!
e. Q: Who brought cookies? A: **us_{SG}*.
f. Ted threw (*us_{SG}*) out (**us_{SG}*).

This paper establishes two new empirical generalizations about *us_{SG}* that have not been noted in the literature. First, that *us_{SG}* is unacceptable in dream reports where it is locally *c*-commanded by *I* (4). Second, that it lacks a bound variable reading (5).

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¹ According to Upton et al. (1994), *us_{SG}* is attested in all English counties except for Rutland and Berkshire. It is also found in Scotland (Miller 1993: 108) and Ireland (Kortmann 2004: 1096). For descriptions of *us_{SG}* in other regional dialects see e.g., Beal 2004, Anderwald 2004.

² Examples (1) and (2a–2g) come from the podcast *Shagged Married Annoyed*. The two hosts are from South Shields, Tyneside.

- (4) I dreamed that I was Brigitte Bardot and I kissed {**me** / **us_{SG}*}
- (5) Only I got a question that made {**me** / **us_{SG}*} feel stupid
= nobody else got a question that made them feel stupid

I offer a two-pronged analysis of *us_{SG}* to capture these facts. First, I propose that *us_{SG}* is a clitic; specifically, a phi (ϕ) head with deficient featural specification—it bears person [π] features but not number [#] features (6). Second, following Snell (2007), I claim that *us_{SG}* receives unambiguously singular reference because it is a *polite pronoun* that serves to establish solidarity with an interlocutor.

- (6) [ϕ π :1]

The structure in (6) is in line with conventional analyses of pronominal deficiency. Since the influential work of Cardinaletti & Starke (1994)—who first showed that certain syntactic, semantic, morphological and prosodic properties of pronouns (see (3)) are in fact derivable from their syntactic structure—linguists have proposed various accounts of syntactic deficiency to explain the behavior of deficient pronouns. For example, in Cardinaletti & Starke’s (1994, 1999) system, *non-deficient* pronouns consist of a lexical layer (L), functional projections (IP), lexical accent (Σ P) (responsible for word stress) and case (CP); *weak* pronouns lack the highest layer and *clitic* pronouns lack the highest two layers.

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|---|---|---|
| (7) a. <i>Strong pronoun:</i> | b. <i>Weak pronoun:</i> | c. <i>Clitic pronoun:</i> |
| [_{C_LP} [_{ΣL_P} [_{I_LP} [_{LP}]]]]] | [_{ΣL_P} [_{I_LP} [_{LP}]]] | [_{I_LP} [_{LP}]]] |

Déchine & Wiltschko (2002) suggest an alternative, finer-grained typology: the largest pronouns consist of a DP layer, a ϕ P layer and an NP layer (8a) and either the topmost layer (8b) or the two top-most layers (8c) may be omitted. Crucially for Déchine & Wiltschko, deficiency spans the D/ ϕ /N categories—it is possible for e.g., pro- ϕ s to be *strong*, *weak* and *clitic* pronouns (9).

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|--|--|------------------------------------|
| (8) a. [_{DP} D [_{ϕP} ϕ [_{NP} N]]] | b. [_{ϕP} ϕ [_{NP} N]]] | c. [_{NP} N] |
| (9) a. <i>Strong ϕP</i> | b. <i>Weak ϕP</i> | c. <i>Clitic ϕ</i> |
| [_{ϕP} ϕ [_{NP} N]]] | [_{ϕP} ϕ] | [ϕ] |

More recently, analyses of structural deficiency go beyond missing layers and argue for *featural* underspecification of existing layers. For example, Fenger (2018) argues for two structurally deficient impersonals: Imp-N and Imp- ϕ (see also Holmberg & Phimsawat 2017 a.o.). Imp- ϕ s are underspecified for ϕ -features, meaning that they must be compatible with any choice of person (including the speaker/hearer). As a result, Imp- ϕ s are compatible with generic readings but *incompatible* with existential readings. English *one* is an example of an Imp- ϕ pronoun (for other analyses of pronominal deficiency that appeal to featural underspecification, see Ruda (e.g. 2021) and Stegovec (2020)).

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|---|-------|
| (10) When one is in Italy, one eats pasta. | GEN |
| (11) * One has called for you, but I don’t know what it was about. | EXIST |

Featural underspecification produces an even more fine-grained model of pronominal deficiency. That is, deficient pronouns can not only lack certain functional projections, be phrasal (*weak*) or a head (*clitic*), but they can also be underspecified for all or only some of their ϕ -features. I propose that *us_{SG}* is a ϕ -clitic. It lacks upper functional layers (e.g. DP) and is a head. I propose too that the ϕ -feature bundle itself is deficient: it is specified for π features but lacks # features. Underspecification for number requires the ϕ -clitic to be compatible with all number values. That is, “singular” *us* is underlyingly number neutral. That it is morphologically plural is in accordance with the fact that plural nouns are compatible with singular and plural interpretations (Sauerland et al. 2005). As we will see in Section 3, the pronoun takes on unambiguously singular reference as a *polite pronoun*.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 shows how this analysis captures the new empirical facts. In Section 3 I turn to the pragmatic function of *us_{SG}* as a polite pronoun. Section 4 concludes.

2. Accounting for the data

Having proposed that us_{SG} is a ϕ -clitic, this section turns to the two new empirical facts about us_{SG} : (i) us_{SG} cannot be locally c-commanded by I in dream reports and (ii) us_{SG} lacks a bound variable reading.

2.1. Singular “us” in dream reports

Lakoff (1972) observed that two first person pronouns can violate the ban on local co-reference in dream reports. In simple declaratives, co-reference between the subject and object of the same argument must be expressed with a reflexive pronoun (12a). This is not true for dream reports (12b). The idea here is that the subject and object of *kiss* in (12b) refer to two counterparts: my dream-self (the person I mentally identify with in the dream) and my bodily alternative (who could appear in the dream as a third person).³

- (12) a. I kissed {*me / myself}
 b. I dreamed that I was Brigitte Bardot and I kissed me.

Interestingly, (12b) fails to carry over to us_{SG} . Speakers judge (13) as ungrammatical.

- (13) *I dreamed that I was Brigitte Bardot and I kissed us_{SG} .

At first blush, we may want to attribute (13) to *De Re* Blocking, a mechanism proposed by Anand (2006) to account for the possible interpretations of pronominal counterparts in dream reports. *De Re* Blocking aims to account for the fact that pronouns in dream reports are restricted as to the individual counterpart they pick out. Specifically, the first pronoun must pick out the dream-self and the second pronoun must pick out the bodily counterpart (see also Percus & Sauerland 2003, Pearson & Dery 2014).

- (14) a. I dreamed that I was Brigitte Bardot and $I_{DREAM-SELF}$ kissed $me_{BODILY.ALT}$
 b. #I dreamed that I was Brigitte Bardot and $I_{BODILY.ALT}$ kissed $me_{DREAM-SELF}$

To explain this, Anand argues that the dream-self corresponds to the *de se* construal of the pronoun, and that *dream* selects for a CP headed by a logophoric operator OP-LOG. All *de se* pronouns in English dream reports must be bound by OP-LOG.

- (15) I dreamed [OP-LOG that $I_{DE SE}$ kissed $me_{DE SE}$] = LF for (14a)


The unattested interpretation in (14b) is ruled out by the *De Re* Blocking Effect (16).

- (16) De Re Blocking Effect (Anand 2006: 10)
 No (syntactic) *de se* anaphor can be c-commanded by a *de re* counterpart.
- (17) [I dreamed OP-LOG that $I_{DE RE}$ kissed $me_{DE SE}$] = unattested (14b)

The consequence of this is that any obligatorily (syntactic) *de se* anaphor should be ungrammatical as the non-*de se* counterpart (i.e., the second pronoun). Anand argues that this is the case for LOG-Mandarin⁴ *ziji*, an obligatorily *de se* anaphor (Pan 1997). Consider (18). The only felicitous reading of (18) is one in which *ziji* is co-indexed with John (k). This is because *ziji*, as an obligatorily *de se* anaphor, must be bound by OP-LOG: if *ziji* is co-indexed with George (i), this is the non-*de se* counterpart and *ziji* fails to be bound by OP-LOG at all; if *ziji* is co-indexed with the dream-self (j), it must have been bound by OP-LOG across the non-*de se* counterpart, violating *De Re* Blocking (19). Thus, the only felicitous LF is (20).

³ That *me* can be locally bound by *I* in this configuration suggests that *counterparts* of a single individual are not fully co-referential (i.e., they are disjoint), thus obviating Condition B (Sells 1985).

⁴ Anand specifies two Mandarin dialects: LOG(ophoric)-Mandarin and IND(exical)-Mandarin. Only LOG-Mandarin derives the *de se* reading of *ziji* via binding by OP-LOG, thus only LOG-Mandarin *ziji* is subject to *De Re* Blocking.

- (18) George_i meng-dao ta_j shi Brigitte Bardot erqie John_k gei ta_{i/j} ziji_{*i/*j/k} de hua
 George dream he COP Brigitte Bardot and John give him self DE picture
 ‘George_i dreamed he_j was Brigitte Bardot and John_k gave him_{i/j} {his_k/*his_i/*his_j} picture.’
- (19) [OP-LOG_j John_k gei ta_i ziji_{*j} de hua] (20) [OP-LOG_k John_k gei ta_{i/j} ziji_k de hua]


If us_{SG} is an obligatorily *de se* pronoun, the ungrammaticality of (13) is explained in the same way. However, us_{SG} does not appear to be obligatorily *de se* like LOG-Mandarin *ziji*. In (21), *ziji* is only licensed in the *de se* context S₁—if Zhangsan does not self-ascribe as being the target of the theft, as in S₂, *ziji* cannot be used. On the other hand, us_{SG} is acceptable in the *de se* context S₁ and the non-*de se* context S₂.

- (21) S₁: Zhangsan says, “That thief stole my purse!”
 S₂: Zhangsan says, “That thief stole that purse!” (can’t see that it was *his* purse)
 Zhangsan shuo pashou tou-le ziji-de pibao (Huang & Liu 2001)
 Zhangsan say pickpocket steal-PERF self-DE purse
 ‘Zhangsan said that the pickpocket stole his purse.’ [✓S₁, # S₂]
- (22) S₁: John says, “That thief hit you!”
 S₂: John says, “That thief hit the woman in the blue dress!” (doesn’t know that woman is me)
 ‘John thinks that the thief hit us_{SG} .’ [✓S₁, ✓S₂]

The *De Re* Blocking Effect will thus not explain the unacceptability of (13). However, the issue with (13) is tied to co-indexation with the subject counterpart. If us_{SG} is locally c-commanded by a non-coindexed pronoun, the ungrammaticality disappears.

- (23) John dreamed that he was Chomsky and **he** hired us_{SG} as a Research Assistant.

For the rest of this section I argue that the ungrammaticality of (13) can be explained using Lasnik’s (1989) generalization that less referential expressions cannot bind more referential ones. Lasnik is concerned with Condition C cross-linguistically, noting that while in English R-expressions must be totally free (24), in Vietnamese they only need to be free locally (25) and in Thai there is no restriction (26).

- (24) a. *John_i saw John_i. (26) a. cɔɔn_i khít [CP wâa cɔɔn_i chálaàt]
 John thinks that John is smart
 b. *John_i thinks that John_i wasn’t chosen.
- (25) a. **John_i** tin [CP **John_i** sê thǎng]
 John thinks John will win
 b. cɔɔn_i chɔɔp cɔɔn_i
 John likes John
 b. * **John_i** thuóng **John_i**
 John likes John

However, if the the first R-expression in (24)–(26) is replaced with a pronoun or an epithet, *all* the examples become ungrammatical (Lasnik 1989: 154–6). This tells us two things: (i) R-expressions must be *pronoun-free* and (ii) epithets behave like pronouns. Epithets also behave like pronouns in that they must be locally free (Lasnik 1989: 154–5). However, epithets also behave like R-expressions. First, they cannot be bound by a pronoun (Lasnik 1989: 155). Second, in both Vietnamese and Thai, epithets can be non-locally bound while in English they must be totally free (27) (cf. (24), (25a) and (26a)).

- (27) a. ***John_i** thinks [CP that I admire **the idiot_i**]
 b. **John_i** tin [CP **thǎng cho de_i** sê thǎng] Vietnamese
 John thinks the son of a bitch will win
 c. cɔɔn_i khít [CP wǎa ?**âybâa_i** chálaàt] Thai
 John thinks that the nut is smart

The upshot of all of this is that R-expressions (names), epithets and pronouns form a *referentiality hierarchy* (28), with less referential expressions being unable to bind more referential ones.

speaker at the utterance context. On the bound reading, it picks out any x such that x did not get a package that excited x .

- (32) Only I got a package that excited me.
 a. = ‘Nobody else got a package that excited me.’ REF
 b. = ‘Nobody else got a package that excited them.’ BVA

I adopt Kratzer’s (2009) approach to bound variable anaphora. Kratzer argues that bound variables enter the derivation ϕ -featureless (as *minimal pronouns*) and that they inherit their ϕ -features from a binder (a λ -operator) introduced by a functional head (e.g., v). Thus, (32b) has the following derivation. The binder $\lambda_{[n]}$ is introduced by v (33a). Next, v introduces the external argument (EA) in Spec- v P and *Predication* (34) applies. The ϕ -features of the λ -operator and the EA unify (33b). Finally, the bound pronoun inherits the ϕ -features of the λ -operator under *Feature Transmission* (35), shown in (33c).⁷

- (33) a. $[_{VP} v \boxed{\lambda_{[n]}} [_{VP} \text{got } [_{DP} \text{a package that excited } pro_{[n]}]]]$
 b. $[_{VP} \boxed{I_{[1SG]}} v \boxed{\lambda_{[1SG]}} [_{VP} \text{got } [_{DP} \text{a package that excited } pro_{[n]}]]]$ *Predication* (34)
 c. $[_{VP} I_{[1SG]} v \boxed{\lambda_{[1SG]}} [_{VP} \text{got } [_{DP} \text{a package that excited } \boxed{pro_{[1SG]}]}]]]$ *Feature Transmission* (35)

- (34) *Predication (Specifier-Head Agreement under Binding)*
 When a DP occupies the specifier position of a head that carries a λ -operator, their ϕ -feature sets unify.
- (35) *Feature Transmission under Binding*
 The ϕ -feature set of a bound DP unifies with the ϕ -feature set of the functional head that hosts its binder.

Finally, Vocabulary Insertion (VI) applies. The VI rules for English oblique pronouns tell us to spell-out $\{[1][SG]\}$ as *me*. Now recall that us_{SG} lacks this bound variable reading. This is particularly intriguing in light of the fact that, cross-linguistically, it is deficient pronouns that allow bound variable interpretations (Cardinaletti & Starke 1994, Despić 2013).

- (36) Only I got a question that made us_{SG} feel stupid.
 a. = ‘Nobody else got a question that made me feel stupid.’ REF
 b. \neq ‘Nobody else got a question that made them feel stupid.’ *BVA

I propose that us_{SG} lacks a bound variable reading (i) because there is no equally deficient nominative counterpart of us_{SG} and (ii) because the conditions governing VI ensure that *me* always wins out. Let’s start with (i). I proposed in Section 1 that us_{SG} is a ϕ -clitic. Following Baker (1988), I assume that cliticization involves syntactic incorporation (see also e.g., Roberts 2010). Evidence for this comes from the fact that cliticization behaves like Noun Incorporation (NI) proper (incorporation of a root noun). Baker notes three restrictions on the distribution of NI: it is (i) disallowed out of a PP, (ii) disallowed out of an NP adjunct, and (iii) restricted to internal arguments (there is no transitive subject NI). Crucially, cliticization is subject to the same restrictions: cliticization (i) out of a PP, (ii) out of an adjunct, and (iii) of a subject is disallowed (see Baker 1988: 81–87 for details). The last restriction is relevant here. The restriction against subject incorporation predicts (correctly) that the ϕ -clitic that corresponds to us_{SG} does not have a nominative counterpart (Edwards 1993). In other words, there is no equally deficient pronoun that can antecede the minimal pronoun.⁸ With this in mind, consider what the derivation for the (ungrammatical) bound variable reading of (36) would look like. Up until VI it would be identical to (33). The bound

⁷ This is a simplification of Kratzer’s (2009) analysis for exposition reasons. Kratzer would actually say that the ϕ -features that end up on the minimal pronoun are base-generated on the closest v to the minimal pronoun (*excited*) because the subject of the relative clause (*that*) is itself a minimal pronoun. But crucially, the features on this v must match those of the matrix subject (*I*) or a bound variable reading does not obtain. Kratzer is unclear on how this is achieved. See Stegovec (2019) for one implementation involving multiple Agree relations between phase heads. What is important is that the λ -binder that binds the minimal pronoun in (33) must be specified for [1SG] because these are the features on the matrix subject (that is, we cannot randomly generate a λ -binder with only [1]).

⁸ Moreover, since bound variable anaphora also involve a focus operator like *only* preceding the binder, a deficient pronoun is independently ruled out of appearing in this position.

pronoun's antecedent must bear [1SG] because the featurally deficient ϕ -clitic is impossible in subject position.

- (37) a. [_{VP} v [$\lambda_{[n]}$] [_{VP} got [_{DP} a question that made *pro*_[n] feel stupid]]]
 b. [_{VP} [$I_{[1SG]}$] v [$\lambda_{[1SG]}$] [_{VP} got [_{DP} a question that made *pro*_[n] feel stupid]]]] *Predication* (34)
 c. [_{VP} $I_{[1SG]}$ v [$\lambda_{[1SG]}$] [_{VP} got [_{DP} a question that made [*pro*_[1SG]] feel stupid]]]] *Feature Transmission* (35)

VI applies. However, VI is constrained by the Subset Principle (Halle 1997).

(38) *Subset Principle*

- A VI is inserted if the item matches all or only a subset of the grammatical features specified in the terminal morpheme.
- Insertion does not take place if the VI contains features not present in the morpheme.
- Where several VIs meet the conditions for insertion, the item matching the greatest number of features in the terminal morpheme must apply.

(38a-b) allows for *me* or *us_{SG}* to be the exponent of *pro*_[1SG]: *me* matches all of the features, *us_{SG}* matches a subset of them, and neither contain any features that are not [1] or [SG]. However, (38c) ensures that *me* must ultimately be picked; while *us_{SG}* meets the conditions for insertion, *me* matches the greatest number of features in the bundle {[1SG]}. Thus, under the current featurally deficient ϕ -clitic analysis, there is no derivation in which *us_{SG}* expones a first person singular bound variable—because there is no equally deficient binder and because the Subset Principle ensures *pro*_[1SG] is spelled-out as *me*—as desired.

2.3. Interim Conclusion

This section has shown how a featurally deficient ϕ -clitic analysis of *us_{SG}* accounts for two novel empirical facts: *us_{SG}* cannot be c-commanded by *I* in dream reports and it lacks a bound variable reading. I have argued that in fact the latter is responsible for the former. That is, because *us_{SG}* lacks a bound variable reading it is more referential than an ordinary pronoun. Given Lasnik's ban on less referential expressions binding more referential ones, *I* is correctly predicted to be unable to bind *us_{SG}* in dream reports. I then argued that it is the underspecification for # that means that *us_{SG}* lacks this bound variable reading.

In the next section I turn to the final puzzle: if *us_{SG}* is underspecified for #, it should be compatible with all number values (i.e., it is number neutral) and yet the salient interpretation of this deficient *us* is singular. I claim that this follows from *us_{SG}* being a polite pronoun.

3. Politeness

Polite pronouns—those that communicate information about the social relation between two individuals—may refer to *honorific* or *familiar* address (Brown & Gilman 1960). Honorific pronouns typically indicate that one individual has a higher social status than another. For instance, to refer to a (singular) addressee of higher social rank in French, the second person *plural* pronoun is used (40).

- (39) As **tu** le livre? (40) Avez **vous** le livre?
 have.PRES.2SG **2SG** the book have.PRES.2PL **2PL** the book
 'Do you have the book?' 'Do you (HON) have the book?'

In (40), the use of *vous* involves a form-meaning mismatch: the pronoun is morphosyntactically 2PL but semantically 2SG. This makes *vous* referentially ambiguous—it could pick out a plural group of addressees or a single addressee depending on the intended pragmatic effect of the interaction. In fact, the use of plural for singular address in honorific contexts is abundant cross-linguistically (e.g., Helmbrecht 2015 a.o), suggesting that referential ambiguity is a typologically robust honorific strategy.⁹ Building on this, Wang (2023) observes the broader typological generalization that pronouns utilize only a small

⁹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to adopt a particular syntactic or semantic formalization of polite pronouns. For this, see e.g., Ackema & Neeleman 2018, Portner et al. 2019.

number of existing features for honorific reference: plural, third person and indefinite. Wang argues that this is because these features are semantically unmarked (i.e., presuppositionless) and because honorificity is constrained by the two maxims in (41) (see Wang 2023 for details). In other words, plural, third person and indefinite are more referentially ambiguous than singular, 1/2 person and definite.

- (41) a. *Taboo of Directness (ToD)*
In respect contexts, use the form with the weakest presupposition.
- b. *Maximize Presupposition!* (Heim 1991)
Choose the strongest presupposition compatible with what is assumed in the conversation.

However, the communicative effect of referential ambiguity is not limited to honorific pronouns. In addition to showing respect, pronoun choice may also reflect empathy, affection or intimacy between interlocutors. In languages with a dedicated honorific, this often looks like using the non-honorific form—e.g., *tu* in French. But some authors argue for dedicated “solidarity” pronouns (different from neutral, non-honorific pronouns like *tu*), and these too are referentially ambiguous. I will discuss two cases here. Cheshire (2013) argues that 1SG *man* in Multicultural London English (MLE; see Cheshire et al. 2008) is used by speakers to solicit empathy from or construct solidarity with the addressee. In particular, it serves to position speaker and addressee as part of the same social group. (42) gives an example in which the speaker, Alex, uses *man* to refer to himself when talking to his girlfriend, possibly to make the remark “less confrontational and face threatening” (Cheshire 2013: 621). Just as third person forms are recruited for honorificity (in e.g., German), third person is recruited for solidarity in MLE.

- (42) didn't I tell you **man**=(1SG) wanna come see you I don't date your friends I date you

Similarly, De Cock (2011) argues that the 2SG reading of 1PL pronouns (or verbal agreement) in English and Spanish establishes solidarity with a hearer by emphasizing empathy. De Cock says of these uses “. . . the speaker assimilates the addresser (with whom he identifies) and the addressee . . . as part of one group.” Again, referential ambiguity is employed (via plural) to communicate in-group solidarity.

- (43) Have **we**=(2SG) eaten **our** sandwich? (44) **Nos hemos** tomado ya las medicinas?
US-REFL have.1PL taken already the medicines
'Have we taken our medicines already?'

Relevant here is that Snell (2007) also suggests that *us_{SG}* is used to construct empathy or solidarity. When a group of girls is giving each other piggybacks and stealing each others shoes, one child (Clare) pleads “Gemma, give *us_{SG}* it”, “give *us_{SG}* it”, “Rosie, give *us_{SG}* it”, “give *us_{SG}* my shoe back”. Snell says:

Clare is not a fully integrated member of this group, and therefore the interaction ranks low on a scale of solidarity. I would suggest that Clare . . . acknowledges her place within this social group through the use of singular *us*. In this interaction, her first goal is to integrate with the group . . . [and t]he use of singular *us* is perhaps a way of appealing to some sense of group support, as if Clare's request has the backing of a group.

I thus propose that *us_{SG}* constitutes another instance of referential ambiguity for pragmatic effect. As discussed in Section 1, “singular” *us* is actually number neutral; it is unspecified for # features, thus allowing for both singular and plural interpretations. Crucially, the possibility of a plural interpretation allows (deficient) *us* to be picked up by the grammar as a polite (solidarity) pronoun where it takes on unambiguously singular reference (see also Brown & Levinson 1987: 127). Additional evidence that *us_{SG}* functions as a solidarity pronoun comes from its distribution. Although it is theoretically unrestricted (see (2)), for some speakers *us_{SG}* is limited to imperatives. This is not surprising if *us_{SG}* is a polite pronoun—imperatives are inherently face threatening acts that a speaker is likely to want to mitigate with a politeness strategy. That it is licensed in other syntactic configurations only goes to show that *us_{SG}* has become a salient pragmatic marker of friendliness and thus a way to construct solidarity with an in-group.

To summarize, the featurally deficient, number neutral analysis of *us_{SG}* that I have proposed (that *us_{SG}* has π but not # features) is compatible with the fact that *us* is regularly unambiguously singular. This is because the referentially ambiguous deficient *us* is used as a polite pronoun.

4. Conclusions

This paper has presented two new empirical generalizations about singular *us*, a deficient pronoun in British English that until now has not received any attention in the generative literature: *us_{SG}* cannot be locally c-commanded by *I* in dream reports and *us_{SG}* lacks a bound variable reading. To account for these facts, I proposed that *us_{SG}* is a ϕ -clitic that is specified for π features but underspecified for #. This also had the effect of making “singular” *us* underlyingly number neutral. I argued that unambiguously singular *us* is a *solidarity* (polite) pronoun in British English, used to engender intimacy and in-group status between speaker and addressee. Under the current number neutral analysis, *us_{SG}*—like many other pronouns cross-linguistically—is utilizing referential ambiguity for pragmatic effect.

The current study contributes a new pronoun to the existing typology of pronominal deficiency. Moreover, *us_{SG}* exhibits behavior that existing models of deficiency do not predict, namely that it lacks a bound variable reading. This suggests that while deficiency may make bound variable interpretations more available, it does not guarantee that a bound variable reading obtains. If the current analysis is correct, bound variable readings of other deficient pronouns may be constrained by their ϕ -feature makeup. There is an interesting correlate to *us_{SG}* in this regard from Hall (2020), who argues that the impersonal pronoun *man* in MLE is underspecified for ϕ -features, and it too lacks a bound variable reading.

Finally, this investigation has provided an empirical foundation on which to continue exploration into the properties of *us_{SG}* and furthered our insight into regional English dialects.

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