

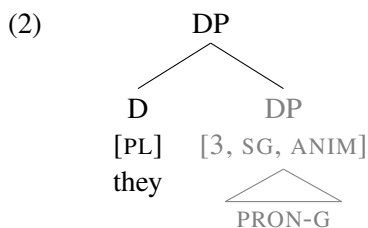
The syntax of pronominal imposters: Insights from singular *they*

1. Introduction. Existing analyses of singular *they* (e.g. Bjorkman 2017, Conrod 2019, Konnely & Cowper 2020) don't provide an account of the fact that it obligatorily triggers plural verbal agreement, as in (1) (all examples use non-binary singular *they*, but we believe the facts extend to all uses of singular *they*).

- (1) Kelly₁ thinks they₁ deserve/*deserves first place.

These accounts claim that the plurality of singular *they* is just a matter of exponence, due to underspecification. The agreement facts, however, point to singular *they* being morphosyntactically plural. We propose instead that singular *they* is an **imposter** in the sense of Collins & Postal 2012, and we justify this claim with parallels with nurse *we*. Nonetheless, we retain the insight from previous literature on singular *they* that English has a genderless third person singular animate pronoun. (By *genderless*, we mean 'neither masculine nor feminine'.) Our innovation is to propose that this pronoun is not singular *they* itself. Rather, singular *they* is a plural D⁰ heading an imposter structure containing a genderless singular pronoun, which is infelicitous on its own. In turn, this contributes to our general understanding of imposters. Whereas the previous literature focuses on person imposters (i.e. an XP that is notionally α person but grammatically β person), singular *they* instantiates a **number imposter** (a possibility envisioned by Collins & Postal). Furthermore, we propose a general schema for **pronominal imposters** (as opposed to non-pronominal imposters such as *Her Majesty* or *Daddy*): Like non-imposter pronouns (Postal 1966; Elbourne 2001), they are D heads with a null complement, but unlike them, their complement is a DP.

2. Singular *they* as a pronominal imposter. Under this analysis, singular *they* is the exponent of a plural D whose complement DP is a null genderless singular animate pronoun that we term PRON-G:



In Collins & Postal's terms, the root node is the *shell DP*, and the inner DP headed by PRON-G is the *core DP*. This core DP must be pronominal, as it triggers Condition B (not C) effects, as shown by (1) and (3).

- (3) * Kelly₁ believes in them₁.

Furthermore, it must be animate and genderless, as it can felicitously refer to non-binary individuals, but not to inanimates (Bjorkman 2017). We return below to the distribution of PRON-G.

3. The shell DP is morphosyntactically plural. The fact that singular *they* obligatorily controls plural verbal agreement ((1)), reflecting the features of the shell DP and not of the core DP, parallels the behavior of imposters in general (Collins & Postal 2012), and specifically, of other pronominal imposters such as nurse *we*. The latter can be tested in Spanish: Nurse *we* embeds a 2SG core DP, yet obligatorily triggers 1PL agreement (1PL and 2SG agreement are syncretic in English, so this can't be tested in this language).

- (4) No crees tú₁ que {deberíamos/ *deberías} ir nostros₁ también a la cama?
 not think.2SG you₁ that {should.1PL/ *should.2SG} go we₁ too to the bed
 'Don't you₁ think that we₁ should be going to bed too?'

Notably, both singular *they* and nurse *we* trigger different verbal agreement than their antecedents (**Kelly think* and **creemos tú*, respectively). If it were simply the case that singular *they* were a genderless singular

pronoun, as suggested by the previous literature, it would be expected to control the same agreement as its genderless singular antecedent, *ceteris paribus*, contrary to fact. Thus, the parallel between singular *they* and other imposters supports an analysis of the former as an imposter.

4. The core DP is morphosyntactically singular. The singularity of the core DP can be detected not only by the singular interpretation of singular *they*, but also by the following fact: A singular *they* pivot in a cleft sentence can trigger *singular agreement* in the embedded clause, but a plural *they* pivot cannot.

- (5) a. Is it just them who {doesn't / *don't} need to be looked at? (singular *they*)
 b. Is it just them who {*doesn't / don't} need to be looked at? (plural *they*)

This parallels the behavior of nurse *we*, in contrast to non-nurse *we*:

- (6) a. Is it just us who {doesn't / *don't} need to be looked at? (nurse *we*)
 b. Is it just us who {*doesn't / don't} need to be looked at? (non-nurse *we*)

This is evidence that the core DP is *morphosyntactically*, not just notionally, singular, as notionally singular but morphosyntactically plural nominals such as *scissors*, trigger plural agreement in this context:

- (7) Is it just the scissors which {don't / *doesn't} need to be looked at?

Whatever the right analysis of agreement in clefts with imposter pivots is, the parallel behavior of singular *they* constitutes an argument for its analysis as an imposter.

5. PRON-G as an ineffable pronoun. We have proposed that the core DP of singular *they* is a genderless singular pronoun. This allows us to keep the insights in previous literature on the topic that English has a genderless third person singular pronoun, while still avoiding the issues raised above. We might expect to see this genderless singular pronoun elsewhere, but generally that isn't the case: singular *they* appears instead. We propose that this is a result of PRON-G being ineffable, which restricts it to contexts in which it is covert, such as the null complement of an imposter structure ((2)), or in salvation-by-deletion contexts (i.a. Ross 1969, Lasnik 1995, Kennedy & Merchant 2000). This latter prediction is borne out left-edge deletion sentences (i.e. Fitzpatrick 2006, Weir 2012):

- (8) Q Has Kelly₁ decided if they₁'re coming to the party?
 A1 Nope. PRON-G hasn't made up their mind yet.
 A2 Nope. They haven't made up their mind yet.

The plural agreement option in A2 is unsurprising: it is the result of left-edge deletion of singular *they*. This, however, cannot be the source of *singular* agreement in A1, since singular *they* triggers plural agreement. Furthermore, the deleted subject can't be the name *Kelly*, since more generally, only prosodically weak elements such as pronouns can be deleted in this construction. It can also not be *he*, *she*, or *it*, since A1 is not a case of misgendering. The only other option is that the deleted subject in A1 is a genderless third person singular pronoun—namely, our hypothesized PRON-G.

6. On the structure of pronominal imposters. In Collins & Postal's analysis, the overt material in an imposter is an appositive modifying the core DP. Evidence of this is the fact that nonpronominal imposters (e.g. *Daddy*) are paraphrasable in terms of an appositive structure (*I, Daddy, ...*). This analysis, however, is not tenable for pronominal imposters such as nurse *we*, which lack such a paraphrase (**You, we, ...*). Our imposter-based analysis of singular *they* in (2) overcomes these difficulties, and can thus be extended to all pronominal imposters. In the specific case of nurse *we*, *we* is a D head with a null 2SG pronominal complement. This type of analysis is a good fit for pronominal imposters, as it constitutes a natural extension of the more general analysis of pronouns as D heads with null complements (Postal 1966; Elbourne 2001).