Singular *they* and the syntax of pronominal imposters[*]

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1. Introduction

The puzzle: Singular *they* is semantically singular, morphosyntactically plural

(1)   A: Hey, have you seen Kelly$_1$?

      B: No, they$_1$ {are$_{pl}$/*is$_{sg}$} late again.

Acknowledged but not accounted for by extant analyses, which take singular *they* to be a singular animate genderless pronoun (Bjorkman 2017, Conrod 2019, Konnelly and Cowper 2020).

- They derive the apparent plurality of *they* via underspecification of the exponent (section 2).

We link this puzzle to a similar puzzle with *imposters* (2), in particular **pronominal imposters** (3). (Collins and Postal 2012)

(2)   *Yours truly*   *semantically 1st sg, morphosyntactically 3rd sg*
       Yours truly (= I) {is$_{3rd\ sg}$/*am$_{1st\ sg}$} in disagreement with Drs. Bjorkman, Conrod, Cowper, and Konnelly.

(3)   Editorial *we*   *semantically 1st sg, morphosyntactically 1st pl*
       We (= I) {are$_{pl}$/*am$_{sg}$} in disagreement with Drs. Bjorkman, Conrod, Cowper, and Konnelly.

Main takeaways

- The problem has to do with **pronouns and their structure**, not with gender per se.
- Unified analysis of pronominal imposters & pronouns as **D heads with elided complements**. For singular *they* (section 3):

  (4)

        DP *Shell*
      D$_{3rd\ pl}$ DP$_{3rd\ sg\ non-bin}$ *Core*
      they
          PRON[-G]

  * The shell DP is plural (section 4).
  * The core DP is singular (section 5).
  * PRON[-G] is ineffable (section 6).

- We preserve the insight from previous work on singular *they* that English has a **singular non-masculine non-feminine animate pronoun**, except it's not *they* itself, but **PRON[-G]**.

We focus on non-binary singular *they*, then extend our analysis to other uses (section 7) and show how restrictions on pronominal imposters shed light on the featural makeup of pronouns (section 8).

2. Singular *they* isn't just a singular pronoun that looks plural. It *is* plural.

Bjorkman 2017, Konnelly and Cowper 2020: Singular *they* is a singular pronoun without binary gender features that can only be realized by *they* for lack of a better match.

(5)

Masc sg	*Fem sg*	*Inan sg*	*Non-binary sg*	*Plural*
$\begin{bmatrix} \text{MASC} \\ \text{SG} \end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix} \text{FEM} \\ \text{SG} \end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix} \text{INANIM} \\ \text{SG} \end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix} \text{SG} \end{bmatrix}$	$[\ \ ]$
$\begin{bmatrix} \text{MASC} \\ \text{SG} \end{bmatrix} \to he$	$\begin{bmatrix} \text{FEM} \\ \text{SG} \end{bmatrix} \to she$	$\begin{bmatrix} \text{INANIM} \\ \text{SG} \end{bmatrix} \to it$		$[\ \ ] \to they$

Without anything else, this analysis predicts that singular *they* should trigger/control the same agreement as other singular pronouns. But that's not true:

(6)   A: Hey, have you seen Kelly$_1$?

      B: No, they$_1$ {are$_{pl}$/*is$_{sg}$} late again.

Could singular agreement be reanalyzed as **gendered (singular) agreement**? No! Antecedents of singular *they* share its gender features, whatever they are, but trigger the same agreement as *he/she/it*:

(7)   Kelly$_1$ {thinks$_{sg}$/*think$_{pl}$} they$_1$ {*deserves$_{sg}$/deserve$_{pl}$} first place.

Plurality of singular *they* is about pronominal structure, not exponence or gender features.

3. A pseudopronominal analysis of singular *they* and other pronominal imposters

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Singular *they* as a pronominal imposter

(8)

      DP *Shell*
   D$_{3rd\ pl}$ DP$_{3rd\ sg\ non-bin}$ *Core*
   they
       PRON[-G]

- **Core DP**: singular non-binary pronoun, matching the antecedent.
- Head of **Shell DP**: plural pronoun, exponed as *they*.

(Terminology from Collins and Postal 2012)

Core DP is a pronoun, triggering Condition B (not C) effects:

(9)   *Kelly$_1$ believes in them$_1$.

(10)   Kelly$_1$ thinks they$_1$ deserve first place.

This is evidence for the pronominal status of the core, not the shell, since it's the core that has the referential index.

We extend this to **all pronominal imposters** (Collins and Postal 2012:217-224):

(11) *Editorial & royal* we *refer to the speaker/author*

    a. We are in disagreement with Drs. Bjorkman, Conrod, Cowper, and Konnelly.

    b. … and We do assure you, on a word of a prince, they shall be duly paid you.

        (Queen Elizabeth I's speech against the Spanish Armada, 1588)

```
        DP
       /  \
  D_1st pl   DP_1st sg
   we          \
                I
```
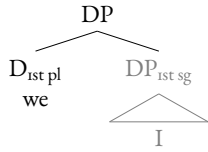
(12) *Nurse* we *refers to (a group containing) the hearer/addressee*   [DP we$_{1st\ pl}$ [DP you$_{2nd\ sg/pl}$]]

    How are we feeling today?

Compare with Collins and Postal's (2012) analysis of **non-pronominal imposters**:

(13) a. **Your humble servant** finds the time before our next encounter very long.

    b. You don't have **Nixon** to kick around anymore.   (spoken by Nixon, 1962)

Overt shell (*Nixon*) is an appositive on covert core (*me*). Collins and Postal's (2012) argument comes from **precursors** of imposters, which involve appositives:

(14) a. **I, your humble servant,** find the time before our next encounter very long.

    b. You don't have **me, Nixon**, to kick around anymore.

But such precursors are not available to pronominal imposters:

(15) a. *I, we, disagree with Drs. Bjorkman, Conrod, Cowper, and Konnelly.   (editorial *we*)

    b. *I, We, do assure you, on a word of a prince, that they shall be duly paid you.   (royal *we*)

    c. *How are you, we, feeling today?   (nurse *we*)

Our analysis instead likens pronominal imposters to ordinary pronouns:

(16) *Pronominal imposters*   (17) *Ordinary pronouns*

```
        DP                              DP
       /  \                            /  \
      D    DP          D with covert  D    NP      D with covert
     we    I/you       DP complement  she  queen   NP complement
     they  PRON[-G]
```
                                                (Postal 1966, Elbourne 2001)

⇒ **Singular *they* and other pronominal imposters behave as ordinary pronouns**:

(18) *Like pronouns, pronominal imposters trigger obligatory particle shift*

    a. Do ghosts freak {them out/*out them}?   c. Do ghosts freak {Kelly out/out Kelly}?

    b. Do ghosts freak {us out/*out us}?   d. Do ghosts freak {m'lady out/out m'lady}?

Cf. Collins and Ordóñez (2021) on Spanish *usted* as a *non*-pronominal imposter.

But pronominal imposters are **not identical to pronouns**: The complement of D (the core) must be covert; they don't allow Adnominal Pronoun Constructions (Postal 1966, Abney 1987,…):

(19) We Americans like our coffee sweet, don't we?   (ordinary *we*)

(20) *We patients like our coffee sweet, don't we?   (nurse *we*)
    (Cf. You patients like your coffee sweet, don't you?)

Upshot: Like pronouns, pronominal imposters are D with null complements, but like other imposters, their hidden content is a DP.

4. The *shell* DP in singular *they* is morphosyntactically *plural*, …

This explains why **verbal agreement is plural**:

(21) They {are$_{pl}$/*is$_{sg}$} late again.   (singular *they*)

By Minimality, only features of the shell are accessible to probing by T.

As expected, the shell DP also controls verbal agreement in other pronominal imposters:

(22) We {are$_{1st\ pl}$/*am$_{1st\ sg}$} in disagreement with Drs. B, C, C, and K.   (editorial *we*)

(23) We {are$_{1st\ pl}$/*am$_{1st\ sg}$} Queen Victoria.   (royal *we*; *Blackadder's Christmas Carol*)

5. … and the *core* DP is morphosyntactically *singular*

Clefted subjects in objective form uniformly trigger 3rd-person agreement in the cleft, with matching number (Akmajian 1970:151ff., Ross 1970:251, Heck and Cuartero 2012:25–31, Douglas 2015):

(24) It's just me who {is / *am / *are} responsible.

Clefted singular *them* controls singular agreement:

(25) a. It's just them who {doesn't / *don't} need to be looked at.   (singular *they*)

    b. It's just them who {*doesn't / don't} need to be looked at.   (plural *they*)

The same holds for other pronominal imposters:

(26) a. It's just us who {is / ??are} in disagreement with Drs. B, C, C, and K.   (editorial *we*)

    b. It's just us who {*is / are} in disagreement with Drs. B, C, C, and K.   (ordinary *we*)

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

    b. Is it just us who {*doesn't / don't} not need to be looked at?   (ordinary *we*)

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

(28) It's just the scissors which {don't / *doesn't} need to be looked at.

Tentative analysis: The controller of agreement is the relative pronoun, whose antecedent is the singular core DP in the clefted pronominal imposter.

6. PRON[-G] is an ineffable pronoun

A puzzle: Why, on the surface, do we usually see imposter singular *they* instead of PRON[-G]?

(29)   Kelly$_I$ thinks they$_I$ deserve first place.

(30)   * Kelly$_I$ thinks PRON[-G]$_I$ deserves first place.

Proposal: <u>**PRON[-G] is ineffable**</u>, which restricts it to covert contexts like the null complement of a pronominal imposter structure: [$_{DP}$ they [$_{DP}$ PRON[-G]]].

> **Ineffability results when there is no matching exponent**

(e.g. Kennedy and Merchant 2000, Arregi and Nevins 2014, Mendes and Nevins 2022)

The rule inserting *they* is specified for **plural** number; it is not an elsewhere (cf. (5); *pace* Bjorkman 2017, Conrod 2019, Konnelly and Cowper 2020). See section 8 for discussion of these features.

(31)

Masc sg	*Fem sg*	*Inan sg*	PRON[-G]	*Plural*
$\begin{bmatrix}3\\ \text{MASC}\end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix}3\\ \text{FEM}\end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix}3\\ \text{INANIM}\end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix}3\\ \text{NON-BIN}\end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix}3\\ \text{PL}\end{bmatrix}$

$\begin{bmatrix}3\\ \text{MASC}\end{bmatrix} \rightarrow$ *he* $\begin{bmatrix}3\\ \text{FEM}\end{bmatrix} \rightarrow$ *she* $\begin{bmatrix}3\\ \text{INANIM}\end{bmatrix} \rightarrow$ *it* $\begin{bmatrix}3\\ \text{PL}\end{bmatrix} \rightarrow$ *they*

(32)   * Kelly$_I$ thinks [3, NON-BIN] (DP$_I$) deserves first place.

PRON[-G] $\xrightarrow[\text{Insertion}]{\text{Vocabulary}}$ *No match!*

Pronominal D triggers ellipsis of its complement (Hewett 2023:sec. 6.2), preempting Vocabulary Insertion at PRON[-G] with a singular *they* imposter.

(33)   Kelly$_I$ thinks [DP D[3, PL] they — DP$_I$[3, NON-BIN] PRON[-G]] deserve first place. ⇒ *ellipsis of DP, no Vocabulary Insertion*

<u>Upshot</u>: the ineffability of PRON[-G] reveals the need for a **marked, plural representation of *they***.

> **Extension: PRON[-G] in left edge deletion**

This predicts that PRON[-G] should appear in salvation-by-deletion contexts (i.a. Ross 1969, Lasnik 1995, Kennedy and Merchant 2000), such as *left-edge deletion* (e.g. Fitzpatrick 2006, Weir 2012).

- Only prosodically weak/unstressed elements like pronouns & auxiliaries can delete.

(34)   a.   Have you invited Kelly to the party yet?
         b.   ~~Have~~ you invited Kelly to the party yet?
         c.   ~~Have you~~ invited Kelly to the party yet?
         d.   * ~~Have you invited~~ Kelly to the party yet?

- Deletion must take place from the left edge.

(35)   * Have ~~you~~ invited Kelly to the party yet?

PRON[-G] can occur in left-edge deletion sentences:

(36)   Q   Has Kelly$_I$ said if they$_I$'re coming to the party?
         A   Nope. ~~PRON[-G]$_I$~~ hasn't responded yet.

⤳   The missing subject isn't *they*: *has* bears sg agreement, cf. left-edge deletion of singular *they*:

(37)   A   Nope. ~~They$_I$~~ haven't responded yet.

⤳   The missing subject isn't *he, she, it*: (36) is not a case of misgendering.

⤳   The missing subject isn't *Kelly*: only prosodically weak elements can be deleted, see (34d).

<u>Upshot</u>: PRON[-G] is an ineffable, non-binary, third person singular pronoun.

7. Extension to other uses of singular *they*

Bjorkman 2017, Conrod 2019, Konnelly and Cowper 2020: singular *they* can also have a binary gendered antecedent (there's idiolectal variation with definite singular antecedents):

(38)   *Quantified antecedent, lexically gendered noun*
         No boy$_I$ thinks they$_I$ deserve first place.

Proposal: imposter *they* can select a binary-gendered singular DP complement instead of PRON[-G].

(39)   No boy$_I$ thinks [$_{DP}$ they [$_{DP_I}$ he]] deserve first place.

8. Restricting pronominal imposters

What determines possible combinations of core and shell DPs? We hypothesize that the restriction is **feature-based** (40), but other analyses are possible.

(40) **Feature compatibility condition on pronominal imposters**
In a pronominal imposter structure, the φ-features of the core DP must be a subset of the φ-features of the shell D(P).

Number asymmetries with pronominal imposters
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(41) A plural shell can have a singular core, but a singular shell cannot have a plural core.
(42) a. Kelly$_1$ thinks [$_{DP}$ they$_{pl}$ [$_{DP,}$ PRON[-G]$_{sg}$]] deserve first place. (singular *they*)
  b. * The girls$_1$ think [$_{DP}$ she$_{sg}$ [$_{DP,}$ they$_{pl}$]] deserves first place.
(43) a. [$_{DP}$ We$_{pl}$ [$_{DP}$ I$_{sg}$]] are Queen Victoria. (royal *we*)
  b. * [$_{DP}$ I$_{sg}$ [$_{DP}$ we$_{pl}$]] am Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.
(44) *Number takeaways:* plural is marked; singular is a subset of plural.
  [PL] vs. [ ]

(45)

```
      DP       are Queen Victoria.
    /    \
   D      DP
 [PL]    [  ]      ⇒ satisfies (40)
  we      I
```

(46) *

```
      DP       am QV & PA.
    /    \
   D      DP
 [  ]    [PL]     ⇒ doesn't satisfy (40)
   I      we
```

Gender asymmetries with pronominal imposters
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(47) A 3rd person singular shell cannot have a 3rd person singular core of a different gender.
(48) * Kelly$_1$ thinks [$_{DP}$ it$_{inanim}$ [$_{DP,}$ PRON[-G]$_{non\text{-}bin}$]] deserves first place.
(49) *Gender takeaways:* all four genders are marked; no subsets among them.
  [MASC] vs. [FEM] vs. [INANIM] vs. [NON-BIN]

(50) *Kelly$_1$ thinks

```
              DP           deserves first place.
           /      \
          D        DP₁
      [INANIM]   [NON-BIN]    ⇒ doesn't satisfy (40)
         it      PRON[-G]
```

Person asymmetries with pronominal imposters
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(51) A 1st pers shell can have a 2nd pers core, but a 2nd pers shell cannot have a 1st pers core.
(52) a. [$_{DP}$ We$_{1st}$ [$_{DP}$ you$_{2nd}$]] need to be patient. (nurse *we*)
  b. * [$_{DP}$ You$_{2nd}$ [$_{DP}$ I$_{1st}$/we$_{1st}$]] need to be patient.
(53) A Participant shell cannot have a 3rd core, and a 3rd shell cannot have a Participant core.
(54) a. * [$_{DP}$ I$_{1st}$/we$_{1st}$/you$_{2nd}$ [$_{DP}$ he$_{3rd}$/she$_{3rd}$/it$_{3rd}$/PRON[-G]$_{3rd}$/they$_{3rd}$]] deserve first place.
  b. * [$_{DP}$ He$_{3rd}$/she$_{3rd}$/it$_{3rd}$/they$_{3rd}$ [$_{DP}$ I$_{1st}$/we$_{1st}$/you$_{2nd}$]] deserve(s) first place.

(55) *Person takeaways:* 3rd person, Participant, and Speaker are marked; 2nd is a subset of 1st.

a.
```
              π
          /   |   \
   [+PART] PART  3 [-PART]
            |
          SPKR
```

  b. 1st: [π-PART-SPKR]
  c. 2nd: [π-PART]
  d. 3rd: [π-3]
     (see Bondarenko 2020, Grishin 2023)

(56)
```
           DP            need to be patient.          (nurse we)
        /      \
       D        DP
[π-PART-SPKR, PL]  [π-PART]    ⇒ satisfies (40)
      We           you
```

(57) *
```
           DP            need to be patient.
        /      \
       D        DP
   [π-PART]  [π-PART-SPKR, PL]   ⇒ doesn't satisfy (40)
      You          we
```

Putting it all together
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(58) *Underlying feature bundles for English pronouns*

		sg	pl
1st		[π-PART-SPKR]	[π-PART-SPKR, PL]
2nd		[π-PART]	[π-PART, PL]
3rd	masc	[π-3, MASC]	[π-3, MASC, PL]
	fem	[π-3, FEM]	[π-3, FEM, PL]
	inanim	[π-3, INANIM]	[π-3, INANIM, PL]
	PRON[-G]	[π-3, NON-BIN]	[π-3, NON-BIN, PL]

The feature compatibility condition (40) correctly restricts (im)possible pronominal imposters.

9. Conclusion

* Singular *they* is a **pronominal imposter**, like editorial/royal *we* and nurse *we*.
* Pronominal imposters are **D heads with null DP complements**.
* Restrictions on pronominal imposters shed light on **the inventory & representation of φ-features**.
* Markedness takeaways:
  ⇒ Number: pl is marked, sg is not.
  ⇒ Person: 3rd, Speaker, and Participant are marked.
  ⇒ Gender: All genders are equally marked.

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A. Idiosyncratic combinatorial restrictions with pronominal imposters

No imposter [$_{DP}$ they$_{3rd\ pl}$ [$_{DP}$ it$_{3rd\ sg}$]] (Bjorkman 2017):

(59) This table$_1$ has a stain on {it$_1$ / *them$_1$}.

No imposter [$_{DP}$ you$_{2nd\ pl}$ [$_{DP}$ you$_{2nd\ sg}$]], see reflexive *-selves* (Collins and Postal 2012):

(60) * Are you$_{pl}$ (= you$_{sg}$) taking good care of yourselves today?

(61) cf. Are we$_{pl}$ (= you$_{sg}$) taking good care of ourselves today? (nurse *we*)

These are idiosyncratic/conventional, and analyzable as resulting from lexical restrictions:

(62) In English, [$_D$ π-3, INANIM, PL] and [$_D$ π-PART, PL] do not c-select DP.

These accidental gaps are filled in other languages, e.g. French polite *vous*:

(63) {Avez / *As} vous le livre? [$_{DP}$ vous$_{2nd\ pl}$ [$_{DP}$ tu$_{2nd\ sg}$]]
{have.PRES.2PL / *have.PRES.2SG} 2PL the book
'Do you$_{pl}$ (= you$_{sg}$) have the book?' (French; Wang 2023:1288, (2))

B. Restricting pronominal imposters: Taking clusivity into account

Person asymmetries taking clusivity into account:

(64) A 1stIn shell can have a 2nd core, but a 1stEx shell cannot have a 2nd core.
   a. [$_{DP}$ We$_{1stIn}$ [$_{DP}$ you$_{2nd}$]] need to be patient. (nurse *we*)

Supporting evidence that nurse *we* is 1stIn comes from Taiwanese 'phone' *we*, which refers to the addressee and must be 1stIn *lan* and not 1stEx *wun* (Collins and Postal 2012:255, n. 1, citing Arthur Wang, p.c.).

(65) A 2nd shell cannot have a 1stIn/Ex core.
   a. * [$_{DP}$ You$_{2nd}$ [$_{DP}$ I$_{1stEx}$/we$_{1stEx/In}$]] need to be patient.

(66) A Participant shell cannot have a 3rd core, and a 3rd shell cannot have a Participant core.
   a. * [$_{DP}$ I$_{1stEx}$/we$_{1stEx/In}$/you$_{2nd}$ [$_{DP}$ he$_{3rd}$/she$_{3rd}$/it$_{3rd}$/PRON[-G]$_{3rd}$/they$_{3rd}$]] deserve it.
   b. * [$_{DP}$ He$_{3rd}$/she$_{3rd}$/it$_{3rd}$/they$_{3rd}$ [$_{DP}$ I$_{1stEx}$/we$_{1stEx/In}$/you$_{2nd}$]] deserve(s) it.

(67) A conjecture: A 1stIn shell can have a 1stEx core, but a 1stEx shell cannot have a 1stIn core.

(68) *Person takeaways:* 3rd, Participant, Speaker, and Addressee are marked; 2nd ⊂ 1stIn.

a. π
   [+PART] PART 3 [-PART]
   SPKR ADDR
   (see Bondarenko 2020, Grishin 2023)

b. 1stIn: [π-PART⟨ADDR, SPKR⟩]

c. 1stEx: [π-PART-SPKR]

d. 2nd: [π-PART-ADDR]

e. 3rd: [π-3]

(69)   DP   need to be patient.   (nurse *we*)

```
          DP
        /    \
       D      DP
```

$[\pi\text{–}\underline{\text{PART}}\!\!<^{\text{ADDR}}_{\text{SPKR}}, \text{PL}]$ $[\pi\text{–}\underline{\text{PART}}\text{–}\underline{\text{ADDR}}]$ $\Rightarrow$ *satisfies (40)*

We   you

(70)   *   DP   need to be patient.

```
          DP
        /    \
       D      DP
```

$[\pi\text{–}\underline{\text{PART}}\text{–}\underline{\text{ADDR}}]$ $[\pi\text{–}\underline{\text{PART}}\!\!<^{\text{ADDR}}_{\text{SPKR}}, \text{PL}]$ $\Rightarrow$ *doesn't satisfy (40)*

You   we
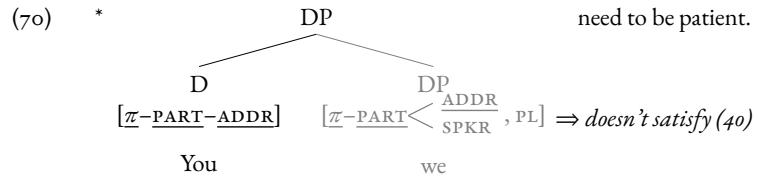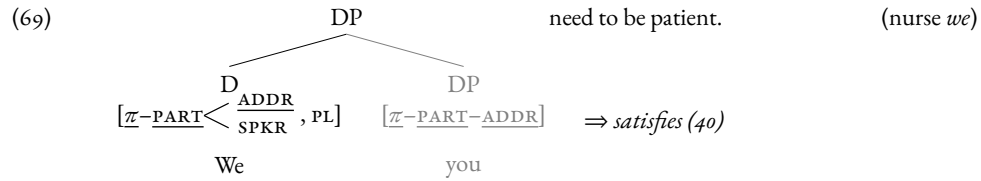
Putting it all together

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(71)   *Underlying feature bundles for English pronouns*

		sg	pl
1stIn		–	$[\pi\text{–PART}\!\!<^{\text{ADDR}}_{\text{SPKR}}, \text{PL}]$
1stEx		$[\pi\text{–PART–SPKR}]$	$[\pi\text{–PART–SPKR, PL}]$
2nd		$[\pi\text{–PART–ADDR}]$	$[\pi\text{–PART–ADDR, PL}]$
3rd	masc	$[\pi\text{–3, MASC}]$	$[\pi\text{–3, MASC, PL}]$
	fem	$[\pi\text{–3, FEM}]$	$[\pi\text{–3, FEM, PL}]$
	inanim	$[\pi\text{–3, INANIM}]$	$[\pi\text{–3, INANIM, PL}]$
	PRON[-G]	$[\pi\text{–3, NON-BIN}]$	$[\pi\text{–3, NON-BIN, PL}]$