

A universal pronoun in English?

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In many colloquial varieties of English, there exist pronominal expressions of the form possessive pronoun + ass, examples of which are given in (1).

- (1) a. Rundgren's shit is only fuckin' good when his ass sings pop....You and I see shit the fuckin' same way. I can dig partying with your ass. (=he sings pop, I can dig partying with you) [rec.music.progressive, 03-12-98]
- b. The poster claimed that HE paid for gas. In reality, every time his ass drives his car where he doesn't need to go, WE pay for it... (=he drives his car) [alt.fan.rush-limbaugh, 07-02-1997]
- c. their asses sure know how to fuckin' jam. kick ass guitar, whaling keys, and fuckin' screeching ass voices! dig it. fuckin' a. after the fuckin' jam was over my ass handed the old chick her ten fuckin' bucks....his ass claimed that his old lady gave him the fuckin' bucks to fuckin' buy an ice cream sandwich....i told his ass i needed the fuckin' money in order to fuckin' buy some beer. shit. my ass ain't ready to rip off texaco quite yet. (=they know, I handed, I told him, I'm not ready) [alt.music.yes, 04-01-00]
- d. Nah, I don't think so....I got my baseball bat right by the bed so I can smash its ass[=a doll], Chucky-style. (=smash it) [http://forums.yellowworld.org/archive/index.php/t-15055.html]

We refer to these expressions collectively as your ass. Your ass is not simply a possessive pronoun + NP (PossNP) construction since, primarily, it is semantically non-compositional. This is clearly evidenced by (1c), where it is the members of the band who know how to jam (not their buttocks) and likewise the speaker presumably handed the ten dollars to the woman with his hands (not his buttocks). This and other data we consider below lead us to conclude that your ass is a pronoun, but of a peculiar type since it appears in both reflexive and non-reflexive contexts as in (2), contrary to the predictions of many binding theories.

- (2) a. Direct object (reflexive): But most people do believe OJ_i bought his $ass_i/himself_i/*him_i$ out of jailtime. [soc.culture.china, 01-28-02]
- b. Direct object (non-reflexive): First Newton, Alexander, and Moore make an ass out of Pangborn $_i$. The more he_i whined about it, the more they nailed his $ass_i/him_i/*himself_i$. [soc.men, 04-23-99]
- c. Subject (non-reflexive): his $ass/he/*himself$ claimed that his old lady gave him the fuckin' bucks.... [alt.music.yes, 04-01-00]

In §1, we give further arguments that your ass is a pronoun. In §2 we consider its binding properties from the perspective of Kiparsky's (2002) binding theory, which predicts the existence of such a pronoun. In §3 we argue that your ass's unusual behavior is due to its semantic and social functions and that it can be accommodated once these are taken into account. We briefly discuss other binding theories in §4 and conclude in §5.

1 The Pronominality of Your Ass

We first present evidence that your ass is pronominal rather than a PossNP, by showing that it patterns more like reflexives than PossNPs by a variety of syntactic and semantic criteria. The main distinction between your ass and PossNPs is compositionality: your ass shares reference with its putative possessive determiner, unlike PossNPs.¹ For example, his ear and his mother refer to ears and mothers, whereas his ass refers to a third person masculine participant, as seen in examples (3) and (4).

- (3) a. John_i bought [his_i ear/his_i mother]_{j≠i} an earring.
b. John_i bought [his_i ass]_i/himself_i an earring.

In (3a) the recipient is the mother or the ear but never John. Yet it is only John in (3b) on the intended reading, not his posterior. If your ass were a PossNP this would be surprising, since the verb would be predicating over the possessor rather than the possessed (i.e. assign a θ -role to the pronoun in [Spec,DP] rather than the DP itself). Second, your ass has unique properties when anteceding other pronouns:

- (4) a. His ass_i upset himself_i/*him_i.
b. His_i broken back upset him_i/*himself_i.

If his ass in (4a) were a PossNP then the putative possessive pronoun should not license a reflexive direct object, as shown in (4b). Third, agreement is optional for plural your ass:

- (5) a. Keep up the good work and copyright everything so you can sue their asses if they steal again [<http://www.testmy.net/topic-868>]

- b. I certainly hope record companies begin to send viruses in their spoofed files,
then I can sue their ass. [<http://www.overclockers.com/tips244/>]

Assuming each record company is autonomous we would expect plural morphology in (5b) (cf. All of you should sue yourselves/*yourself). Finally, your ass patterns like reflexives in terms of modifiability. While PossNPs allow a range of modification by adjectives, PPs, and relative clauses as in (6a), your ass is more limited, allowing only adjectives as in (6b) but never relative clauses or PPs as in (6c), much like reflexives as in (6d).

- (6) a. I borrowed your red jacket from Macy's that Sandy bought for you.
b. Get your bad/ugly self/ass outta here.
c. *The doctor_i saw himself_i from Houston/who stopped by last week.
d. *The doctor_i saw his ass_{i,j} from Houston/who stopped by last week.

This evidence suggests strongly that your ass patterns more like a lexical reflexive than a compositional PossNP. One could argue that perhaps the expression is still compositional, where ass in this context is a unique lexeme in English that is subcategorized for a possessive pronominal specifier and enforces identity between the possessive pronominal and the entire NP (i.e. ass is a relational noun whose semantics is the identity function). However, if this were the case, we would expect your ass to behave like any other PossNP and not to occur in reflexive contexts, though it clearly does (as in (2a), for example). Furthermore, we would also expect it to license \bar{N} -ellipsis like other PossNPs, though it clearly does not, as shown in (7) (coindexation indicates “sense” coreference and not strict coreference).

- (7) a. Mary had her office_i painted, and Jane had hers e_i remodeled.
b. *John got himself_i/his ass_i a pedicure, and Pat got his e_i a manicure.

Alternatively, one could argue that your ass is an epithet with unusual binding properties. But if it were an epithet then we would not expect it to occur with a c-commanding definite noun phrase or pronominal antecedent (Lasnik 1976), though it clearly can:²

- (8) a. Mary told him_i that his ass_i had to leave.
b. John told every senator_i/*Bush_i/*him_i that the [son of a bitch]_i was a crook.

Given the evidence presented here, it is clear that your ass is not a regular PossNP, but is instead much like a reflexive pronoun.³ The superficial similarity between your ass and a PossNP is not surprising, however, since complex pronominals in a variety of languages (including English himself) are often grammaticalized PossNPs formed from a possessive pronoun+some body part (Faltz 1985, Schladt 2000).⁴

2 Pronoun Typology and Blocking

In this section we explore the distribution of your ass compared to other English pronominals. For expository purposes we adopt the blocking-based pronominal typology of Kiparsky (2002), since it rather uniquely predicts the existence of a pronoun like your ass. However, nothing crucially hinges on this choice of framework. The conclusions we draw here are applicable to any theory of binding, as we discuss briefly in §4. Kiparsky (2002:200ff) proposes a typology of pronouns based on a hierarchy of binding domains. The core idea

is that each pronominal is associated with a particular syntactic domain in which it must be bound. Binding domains are organized in terms of a specificity hierarchy, and a pronoun with a more specific binding domain blocks the use of a pronoun with a more general binding domain in the more specific domain. For instance, English him has a very broad binding domain (as discussed below), whereas himself has an extremely restricted domain (occurring only in local contexts). Himself blocks him in local domains (depending on other interacting constraints), but otherwise him may be bound in nearly any domain.

The broadest criterion Kiparsky proposes for classifying binding domains is referential dependence. Referentially dependent pronouns require an overt discourse antecedent while referentially independent pronouns do not (9a). Referentially dependent pronominals, in turn, are either non-reflexive (9b.i), allowing syntactic or discourse-based antecedents, or reflexive, requiring a syntactic antecedent.⁵ Reflexive pronouns may be either finite-bound, requiring an antecedent in the same finite clause, or not finite-bound, allowing antecedents outside the finite clause (9b.ii.A). Finally, finite-bound pronominals may be locally-bound, requiring an antecedent in the “first accessible subject domain”, or not (9b.ii.B).

- (9) a. Referential Independent: Tell me about $—_i$, $—_j$, and $—_k$. [pointing]
- b. Referentially Dependent:
- i. Non-Reflexive: John_i is here. I saw $—_i$.
- ii. Reflexive:
- A. Non-Finite-Bound: John_i thought that I would criticize $—_i$.
- B. Finite-Bound:

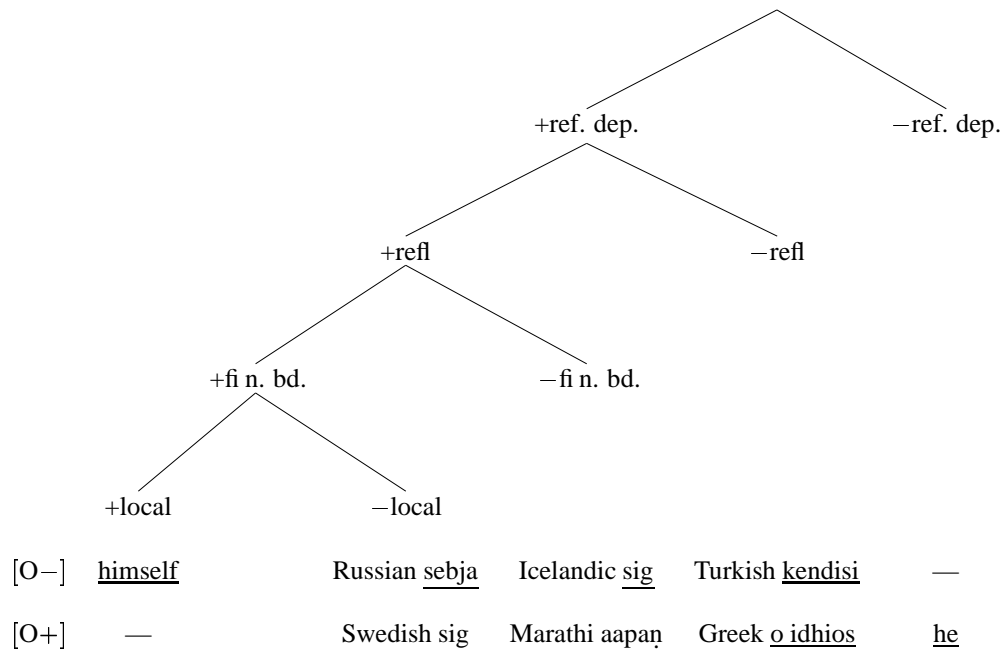
1. Non-Local: John_i asked me to criticize —_i.
2. Local: John_i criticized —_i. (Kiparsky 2002:201)

Each domain is cross-classified for the property of “obviation”:

- (10) Obviation: Coarguments have disjoint reference (cf. Kiparsky 2002:187)

An obviative pronoun must obey obviation, and a proximate does not necessarily obey obviation. In English, the distinction between obviatives and proximates is reflected in the distinction between pronouns and anaphors. However, as Kiparsky (2002:200ff) shows, there are languages with obviative/proximate pronouns (Swedish) and languages with obviative/proximate reflexives (Algonquian), supporting the validity of this distinction cross-linguistically. The proposed binding domains are illustrated in (11), with example pronominals satisfying most of the types (Kiparsky 2002:201, (62)).⁶

(11)



What is of interest here are the two gaps in (11): obviative locally bound pronominals (presumably a theoretical impossibility since locality is always proximate) and a proximate referentially independent pronoun, i.e. a pronoun compatible with any domain in both obviative and proximate uses and thus a “universal pronoun” (Kiparsky 2002:202). Kiparsky himself argues that the latter gap is systematic, on the independent grounds that principles of contrastiveness ensure all pronouns must be constrained in some way (i.e. have a positive function in contrast with other pronouns). In fact, we believe that your ass fills this gap in the typology since it can be used in all of the domains in (9), as shown in (12)-(16).

(12) Referentially independent:

- a. On the agenda for today is to talk about his ass_i and her ass_j. [pointing]
- b. I mean her ass, over there.

(13) Referentially dependent, non-reflexive:

- a. Please explain to me is Bobby V_i a good coach or not....His_i team has less infield errors than anyone else, give his ass_i some credit.
[alt.sports.baseball.ny-mets, 08-25-99]
- b. I think if Mike and Buzz had their way, he'd_i be outta there. Mike hates his ass_i and Don knows it.[alt.fan.don-n-mike, 06-16-00]

(14) Reflexive, non-finite-bound:

- a. I had one guy tell me the change was for gas, the box, and I bought his ass_i a coke while he waited in a long line.... [alt.toys.gi-joe, 05-11-02]

- b. First Newton, Alexander, and Moore make an ass out of Pangborn_i. The more he_i whined about it, the more they nailed his ass_i. [soc . men, 04-23-99]

(15) Finite-bound, non-local:

- a. John_i asked me not to criticize his ass_i.
b. Mary_i told me to buy her ass_i a diamond ring.

(16) Local:

- a. And don't expect people to be nice to newbies either. You're treading on their turf, you better know how to behave your ass. [alt . rave, 03-03-95]
b. Don't give up! I am 30 and was ag. for a little over a year until I_i got my ass_i some help... [alt . support . agoraphobia, 06-15-99]

The fact that your ass can occur in contexts such as (16) shows that your ass is proximate, and the fact that it can occur in contexts such as (12), with no linguistic antecedent, shows that it is referentially independent. These data show that your ass is in fact a universal pronoun, i.e. a referentially independent proximate. However, your ass poses a serious problem for this theory since it seems to contradict the blocking principle, which incorrectly predicts that reflexives should block your ass in local binding domains. In the next section we explore aspects of the meaning of your ass which may explain its deviant behavior.

3 Semantics of Your Ass and Blocking

We argue that two elements of the meaning of your ass, not found in other English pronominals, account for its behavior. First, your ass is only used in certain social settings; there are many social settings in which it is not deemed appropriate (e.g. in a reputable academic journal). Spears (1998:236) argues that the meaning of your ass is “social and abstract” and that it “marks a discourse as being in U[ncensored] M[ode]”, i.e. in a social context where expressions that would be inappropriate elsewhere (i.e. censored contexts) are neutral with respect to appropriateness (Spears 1998:232).⁷ This fact alone shows that there are more differences between your ass and other pronominals than simple domain specificity.

Second, even controlling for social context, your ass and other English pronominals are not simply interchangeable. Although we have not conducted a systematic investigation, it is intuitively clear that all of the examples that we have seen so far would be qualitatively different if a standard English pronominal were used in place of your ass. First, your ass can mark negative connotations of the ass-marked referent:

- (17) a. I am gonna knock your ass down the hill. [rec.climbing, 08-18-01]
b. I am gonna knock you down the hill.

In (17a), use of your ass conveys the message that the hearer is somehow subordinate to the speaker, i.e. the speaker makes it explicit that she believes the hearer to be of no match for her. When a regular pronoun is substituted, as in (17b), the same effect is not achieved. This negative use of your ass seems to be the most common, characterizing most of the

examples we have given above. For such uses, the evaluation scale tends to be a relative scale, wherein the ass-marked referent is typically conveyed to be lower on some power-based hierarchy relative to another participant in the dialogue or discourse.

In addition to negative connotations, your ass can also mark positive connotations for the ass-marked referent as in (18) (the clearest example of this type from our corpus):

- (18) a. brittney, you stupid....do you really think my man mase is really gonna reply to your stupid shit...mase is a horn dog, his ass fucks all his girls, ... [rec . music . hip-hop, 01-09-98]
- b. ...mase is a horn dog, he fucks all his girls...

In (18a), the writer uses your ass to convey a more positive message regarding the ass-marked referent, conveying envy or respect by referring to Mase with your ass. The parallel example in (18b) with a standard pronoun is neutral regarding the writer's attitude towards Mase. These positive uses are rarer in the data we examined, and tend to involve generic scales: the ass-marked referent is typically conveyed in a generic positive light rather than relative to another discourse participant. A better understanding of the semantics of your ass will require much more examination of naturally occurring data. However it should be clear that your ass carries meaning that other English pronominals do not.⁸

We do not present a formal account of how such semantics is incorporated into blocking, but the core idea is that blocking based on binding domains is not enough. A more general notion of strict specificity that includes both binding domains and social and semantic content is likewise not enough, since no strict specificity relationship holds between

reflexives and your ass: one has a more specific domain and the other a more specific meaning. Instead the interaction must involve preserving semantics even when domain specificity is violated. This could be implemented in the OT account of Kiparsky by assuming that your ass overtly encodes additional meaning over other pronominals, and that there is a very highly ranked constraint, a sort of “semantic faithfulness” constraint, requiring this meaning to be overtly realized in the output if present in the input (following e.g. Kuhn 2003). With such a constraint, reflexives always lose to your ass on semantic grounds regardless of domain specificity since reflexives never carry the more specific semantics. Presumably other approaches would accomplish the same thing, but the crucial point is that blocking must be sensitive to semantics in addition to binding domains, and must do so in a more complicated way than just specificity. Note that this does not contradict Kiparsky’s claim that all pronouns must obey some principle of contrastiveness, since the social and evaluative meanings discussed here are defined contrastively. If Kiparsky’s argument is correct, it would predict that there should be no referentially independent proximates that do not carry some social or lexical meaning above and beyond more restricted pronouns.⁹

4 Your ass and other binding theories

Although we have examined the behavior of your ass in terms of Kiparsky’s typology (since it predicts the existence of “universal pronouns”), it should be clear that your ass poses a difficulty for nearly any binding theory that does not take these kinds of social and evaluative meanings into account. Obviously, other blocking theories (e.g. Burzio 1999)

need to be modified in ways similar to Kiparsky's. In the generative tradition, most standard binding theories (such as those proposed by Chomsky 1981, Reinhart and Reuland 1993, Pollard and Sag 1994) do not rely on blocking, but instead discretely partition the space of pronouns in a language by means of cross-classifying features (e.g. [\pm pronoun], [\pm anaphor] in Chomsky 1981) and posit binding principles that operate on pronouns with certain feature clusters (e.g. [+anaphor] elements in Chomsky's approach must be bound in their minimal governing domain according to Principle A). Although we do not go into detail here, your ass clearly poses a problem for such theories since it is not clear that it is subject to any binding principles at all. Because of this, it is not clear how it should be classified with respect to any features that yield a discrete partitioning.¹⁰ Instead, its distribution is determined on social and semantic grounds as argued above, which the binding principles must take into account. Likewise, a significant amount of semantic work has dealt with anaphora and the principle of obviation (e.g. Reinhart 1983 or Partee and Bach 1981 for a Montague-grammar style approach), or else has derived complex binding facts from pragmatics (Levinson 1987 and especially Huang 2000, inter alia). The pragmatic approaches are of particular interest since they involve integrating Gricean constraints on informativity with syntactic constraints on pronominal distribution. Indeed our own account of your ass assumes a similar integration of semantics/pragmatics and syntax, although the particular semantic/pragmatic conditions we argue for here are social and evaluative in nature and thus represent a further axis of variation beyond syntax and informativity. In general, your ass poses a problem for any theory of binding that does not take

the particular kinds of semantics we argue are relevant here into account.

5 Concluding remarks

We have shown first and foremost that your ass has pronominal uses, bringing new data to bear on binding theory. Secondly, your ass appears to fill in a hitherto unattested pronominal type in the typology of Kiparsky (2002), namely the most general category of “universal pronoun”. At the same time, it poses a problem for Kiparsky’s blocking principle since your ass can appear in any binding domain, regardless of whether another pronoun has a more specific binding domain. We argue, however, that your ass contributes additional meaning that no other English pronominal contributes and, in some fashion or another, the necessity of expressing this meaning must be taken into account by binding theory.

Notes

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¹Here and throughout we ignore the literal interpretation of your ass referring to a buttocks and focus only on the non-literal meaning. Most of our data involves pronominal uses of your ass referring to animate

entities, although inanimate its ass is also possible, as shown in (1d).

²Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out these alternative analyses and arguments against them.

³We have ignored here non-pronominal+ass expressions, e.g. John's ass. These are certainly possible, and their productivity suggests that there is still a compositional process involved in forming ass-expressions (perhaps similar to the productivity of the self morpheme found in reflexives with non-pronominal possessives, e.g. Michael's bad self). However, these expressions do not have exactly the same distribution as your ass (cf. I told him_i that [his ass]_i/*[John's ass]_i had to leave), suggesting that they are at least a partially independent phenomenon. Nonetheless, such expressions do have many of the same properties discussed above for your ass, e.g. limited modifi ability, restrictions on \bar{N} -ellipsis, optionality of agreement, etc., suggesting that whatever process forms them is also not the one that forms PossNPs.

⁴Typically complex pronominals grammaticalize into reflexives, since the PossNP construction serves to place the pronominal (as a possessive) in a non-argument position and thus exempt it from Principle A type-binding constraints. Interestingly, Holm (2000:226) notes that the word for buttocks in several creole languages also shows at least reflexive uses, if not pronominal ones (Holm notes only the reflexive uses).

⁵This use of the term ‘reflexive’ is not to be confused with the more common usage meaning coreferential with a co-argument.

⁶See Kiparsky 2002 for further details on these classifications and the role of obviation.

⁷Spears' discussion was specifically concerned with use of the ass morpheme in African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), whereas our discussion concerns uses of just your ass by a wider set of speakers, including judgments from our own, non-AAVE, native dialects of American English, which have your ass.

⁸Future work on the semantics of your ass might consider it in the context of a theory of expressive content (Potts and Kawahara 2004). As Chris Potts (personal communication) remarks, the meaning of your ass that we have identified above does at least superficially seem to be consistent with expressive meaning as discussed in Potts and Kawahara 2004 on Japanese honorifics. Whether your ass in contrast to non-ass marked pronominals unambiguously has all the elements of an expressive operator as discussed by Potts and Kawahara (2004:3–6) we leave as a question for future work.

⁹This contrastiveness also eliminates an alternative, register-based analysis of your ass in which your ass and other English pronominals belong in different registers. On such an analysis, the distribution of *your ass* follows from the fact that it is the only pronominal in its register and thus no blocking can occur. However, the unique meaning of your ass exists in direct contrast to alternative English pronominals. If these pronominals were not part of the same register, then your ass could not contrast with them. Furthermore, your ass and other pronominals occur side-by-side in many of our naturally occurring examples, as in (18a).

¹⁰One could suppose your ass is underspecified for such features, and is thus exempt from binding principles (or rather it is licensed by all principles under all circumstances). But allowing underspecified features opens up a range of new logical possibilities for pronoun types in such theories, not all of which are necessarily empirically attested. See Beavers and Koontz-Garboden (2003) for further discussion.

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