

## ON THE STRUCTURE OF *WE BOYS, US GIRLS* AND THE LIKE

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the syntactic status of the pattern represented by such constructions as those in italics in (1) and (2) below:

- (1) *We men* will stay in this position.
- (2) *You girls* try to keep out of the way.

Although the pattern has received only passing attention in grammars, two proposals have become rooted in the tradition: one is the DETERMINER theory, advocated, for instance, by Postal (1964: 201-225), Burton-Roberts (1975: 393) and Huddleston (1984: 233 ff.), and the other is the APPOSITIVE theory, put forward by, among others, Delorme & Dougherty (1972), Quirk et al. (1985: 352) and Hernanz & Brucart (1987: 151). These two proposals will be rejected here. It will be argued that no formal account of the pattern in question can be satisfactorily attained. This is because this construction type fails to conform to prototypical conditions for any syntactic category one may wish to associate it with.

### 2. THE DETERMINER THEORY

Already in the late sixties Postal put his claim in the following form:

(...) my basic claim (...) is that the so-called pronouns *I, our, they*, etc., are really articles, in fact types of definite articles. However, article elements are only introduced as segments in intermediate syntactic structures. In the deepest structures they are, (...), not present segmentally but are represented as syntactic features of nouns, features analogous to Animate, Human, Countable, etc. (p. 203)

In order to support his claim that pronouns are articles, Postal postulated that the head noun of the NP in which the pronouns are articles is *one(s)*:

- (3) I (one)  
    You (one)  
    We (ones)  
    They (ones)

Since we do not usually find such forms in everyday speech, Postal found himself compelled to posit a rule of *Pronoun Deletion (PRO DEL)* by means of which only the forms which he

takes as articles (*I, you, we, etc.*) would surface. Actually, stripped of the generative jargon of the time, it is interesting to find out that Postal's dated form of argumentation is somewhat backed up by the existence in certain dialects of English of forms such as:

- (4) we'uns,  
you'uns

But, apart from this, the real motivation behind Postal's and all other proponents of the determiner theory is precisely the existence of forms such as *we men, you girls*, and so on, which are customarily presented as evidence that, even in standard English, so-called pronouns may behave as articles, at least in this context. Indeed, in these constructions the personal pronoun enters into paradigmatic contrast with the definite article and other ordinary determiners:

- (1) *We men* will stay in this position.  
(5) *The men* will stay in this position.  
(6) *Some men* will stay in this position.

It is no wonder, then, that this determiner theory has established itself in the grammatical tradition, and that passing dealings with the construction under scrutiny here have often been speedily resolved by invoking such a theory.

### 3. THE APPOSITIVE THEORY

#### *The rejection of Postal's theory.*

However, there are insurmountable difficulties with this analysis. As a matter of fact, the distributional similarity that we observed in examples (1), (5) and (6) above can be shown to have little significance and, what is more important, to be easily accounted for on other grounds. As Delorme and Dougherty point out, the determiner theory would be simplified if all the constructions in (7)-(8) below were well-formed:

- |               |                  |
|---------------|------------------|
| (7a) *I boy   | (7d) we boys.    |
| (7b) *you boy | (7e) you boys.   |
| (7c) *he boy  | (7f) ?they boys. |

- (8a) \*I girl who who Bill likes.  
(8b) \*you girl who Bill likes.  
(8c) \*she girl who Bill likes.  
(8d) we girls who Bill likes.  
(8e) you girls who Bill likes.  
(8f) ?they girls who Bill likes. (p. 12)

Indeed, if personal pronouns were actually definite articles, there would be no reason why all the (a)-(c) examples above should not be well-formed. Their ungrammaticality can hardly be

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referred to as “a minor, more or less morphophonemic fact”, as Postal contends. The same can be said about cases involving the superlative construction:

- (9) \*Smallest ones eat a lot.
- (10) The smallest ones eat a lot.
- (11) \*We smallest ones eat a lot.
- (12) We, the smallest ones, eat a lot

and also about other cases such as (13)-(20):

- (13) \*Very ones Bill saw will go.
- (14) The very ones Bill saw will go.
- (15) \*We very ones Bill saw will go.
- (16) We, the very ones Bill saw, will go.
- (17) \*Same ones Bill saw will go.
- (18) The same ones Bill saw will go.
- (19) \*We same ones Bill saw will go.
- (20) We, the same ones Bill saw, will go.

What Delorme and Dougherty effectively prove is that the proforms appearing in initial position in all the constructions mentioned must be followed by whole NPs, and not just by nouns. This is irreconcilable with the determiner interpretation, which assumes that articles precede simple nouns in order to form full NPs. Note that the only instances in which the pattern is acceptable involve, invariably, a NP with the (null) plural, indefinite determiner (e. g. *boys*). The fact that plural indefinite NPs are realised phonetically by means of simple nouns seems to be what misled Postal, Burton-Roberts, Huddleston and many others into assuming that the constituent in initial position (*we, you*) acted as a determiner of such nouns. It is clear, however, that when the determiner must be phonetically present, that is, in the singular, its absence necessarily results in the ungrammaticality of the corresponding string (e. g. \**I boy*). So much then for the determiner theory.

#### *Delorme and Dougherty's ANP*

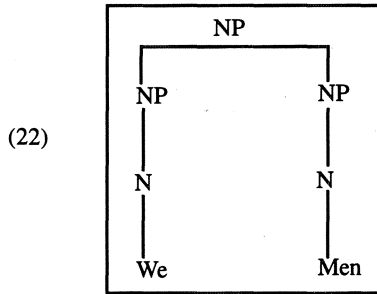
Delorme and Dougherty's account comprises more than a critical review of the determiner theory. In order to accommodate the facts arising from their reply to Postal,<sup>1</sup> they propose *the Appositive NP Analysis (ANP)*. The ANP aims to bring the constructions under review, as well as other similar ones, under the scope of the following phrase structure rule:

$$(21) \text{ NP} \left\langle \text{-----} \right\rangle \text{ NP (NP)}$$

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<sup>1</sup> Particularly, the fact that the element following the pronoun must be a NP.

(21) is specifically a rule for the formation of appositive constructions of whatever kind. In fact, (21) is simply a late phrase-structure grammar reformulation of the traditional Hockettian conception of apposition. If we apply it to *we men*, for instance, it would have the following constituent structure:<sup>1</sup>



Aside from this PM, Delorme & Dougherty never specify what their view of apposition exactly is. From their comments here and there, we may gather that this view is quite vague. In the first place, they admit the inclusion as apposition of “the complements of nouns like *fact*, *reply*, *answer*, *question*, etc.” (p. 11), but they do not bother to explain what prompts an appositive analysis for these “complements”. Thus, they also see as apposition structures such as *my brother Bill* and *the word apple*, which appear to be better explained in terms of ordinary dependency. That is, for Delorme and Dougherty, both complements and modifiers *may* be appositives, but we are never told *when* complements and modifiers *are not* appositives.<sup>2</sup> In addition to this, on the basis of the semantic interpretation of the following two examples:

(23) *We men*.

(24) \**We men* think that *we women* should go.

they postulate that constructions like *we men* etc. can always “have appositive meanings”.<sup>3</sup> However, they fail to explain what kind of meanings they are talking about. All they say is that (24) “assert(s) that *we are men* and that *we are women*” (p. 16), a logical impossibility that is supposed to explain the ungrammaticality of this construction. But, is such an assertion meant to claim that the members of an apposition are co-referential, or that an underlying

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<sup>1</sup> Notice, incidentally, that Delorme and Dougherty’s rule yields a PM for apposition that is virtually identical to that of a coordinate phrase.

<sup>2</sup> Since it is unlikely that they regard apposition, modification and complementation as one and the same thing they should clearly specify when, if ever, the three notions coalesce.

<sup>3</sup> Contrary to Postal’s assertion that they do not have appositive meanings, “at least not always” (p. 219).

copular relationship should be posited between them? Delorme and Dougherty do not clarify any of the claims they make in passing.

This is because they are more concerned with rejecting the determiner theory and with integrating constructions like *we men*, etc. into what they call their “natural class” of structures than with putting forward a tight definition of the notion of apposition. What is of importance to us, therefore, is to examine what they explicitly consider to be the same “natural class” of constructions. In their view, the paradigm resulting from the application of rule (21) above is the following:

- |                     |                       |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| (25a) I, the boy,   | (25d) We, the boys,   |
| (25b) you, the boy, | (25e) you, the boys,  |
| (25c) he, the boy,  | (25f) they, the boys, |
| (26a) I, a boy,     | (26d) we, boys,       |
| (26b) you, a boy,   | (26e) you, boys,      |
| (26c) he, a boy,    | (26f) they, boys,     |

It will be seen that in all the examples above there are strong intonation breaks (commas on the written page) between the two NPs. Since Delorme and Dougherty had been dealing with constructions without any intonation boundary, they find themselves compelled to account for it. They state:

The appositive constructions with a plural indefinite article on the appositive NP (e. g. *we men from the East Side*, *we peachpickers*, etc.) may be spoken with or without a comma intonation separating the appositive. In this respect, they are like the appositive constructions with a definite article on the appositive NP (e. g. *we the people of The United States want justice*; *we the peachpickers, being of sound mind and body, want a union*; *Bill the alcoholic forgot where he lived*). (pp. 10-11)

In other words, in Delorme and Dougherty's view, the relationship between examples like *we, boys*, and others such as *we boys* “provide[s] evidence that stress, intonation, pauses, etc. are not necessarily revealing in specifying underlying constituent structure or semantic interpretation”, (p. 11). Delorme and Dougherty's account is, however, misleading in that it fails to take into consideration the exact nature of the differences between the instances with and without the pause pitch. Witness (27)-(28) below now:

- |                    |                      |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| (27a) *I the boy   | (27d) we the boys    |
| (27b) *you the boy | (27e) you the boys   |
| (27c) *he the boy  | (27f) *they the boys |
| (28a) *I a boy     | (28d) we boys        |
| (28b) *you a boy   | (28e) you boys       |
| (28c) *he a boy    | (28f) ?they boys     |

In the face of the ungrammaticality of more than sixty-six per cent of the previous restrictive paradigm, it is not clear how one should take Delorme and Dougherty's assertion that “stress,

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intonation, pauses, etc. are not necessarily revealing in specifying underlying constituent structure or semantic interpretation" (p. 11). The fact is that all twelve non-restrictive are good, while only four restrictive are so –the latter being the first and second persons in the plural. Note further that all the asterisked examples involve two full NPs as members. This means that Delorme and Dougherty's rule (21) is not enough to "generate" the well-formed strings (*we boys, you boys*) and block the ill-formed ones (*\*I the boy, \*he the boy*). Clearly, we need more than a phrase structure rule to account for the irregular distribution of the data.

#### 4. THE IDIOSYNCRASY OF THE PATTERN

As a matter of fact, it is precisely the highly idiosyncratic behaviour of the first and the second persons in the plural that casts doubts on linguists' attempts at systematization and regularization. In normal circumstances, research on the syntactic organization of language is carried out on the assumption that categories are a stable theoretical construct. In this way, one can start investigating the behaviour of, say, Prepositional Phrases, knowing that such phrases are incompatible with certain functions, certain positions in the sentence structure, and so on. The description that one gains by proceeding in this way is valid for most of the occurrences of the category involved (though, of course, never for all occurrences). Consider now the case of personal pronouns. Normally, first and second person forms designate the speaker and the hearer respectively. They are *deictic*<sup>1</sup> forms in that, in order to interpret them appropriately, one must always have recourse to the pragmatic situation in which the act of speech takes place. Unlike nouns, personal pronouns designate grammatical personae, which explains why, despite their lack of inherent, semantic features, they never pose problems to denote a proper referent. By definition, therefore, first and second person pronouns incorporate, when they first appear in the context, all the referential specification of the individuals they denote. This is the reason why they do not usually admit further restrictive qualification of their reference and why, consequently, the only kind of expansion natural to them is the non-restrictive one.<sup>2</sup> All this is well-known and serves as a point of reference –or, as some may say, as a prototype– for any construction involving these forms. Coming back to *we boys*, etc., the problem is that there seems to be no way of relating the grammar of such structures to the prototypical grammar of personal pronouns, since an essential property of these (viz. their incompatibility with restrictive expansions) is distinctly not present in such structures as *we boys*. Yet, as we have just seen, they are still personal pronouns, or at least not articles.

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<sup>1</sup>. Cf. Huddleston's words: "We say that an expression is used deictically when its interpretation is determined in relation to certain features of the utterance-act: the identity of the speaker and addressee together with the time and place at which it occurs. Take, for example, an utterance of: *I want to know why you are here*. Clearly the referents of *I* and *you* are respectively whoever is uttering the sentence and whoever is being addressed: if *Tom Smith* utters (the sentence), *I* refers to *Tom Smith*, if *Sue Jones* utters it, *I* refers to *Sue Jones*, and so on" (1984: 282). Third person forms are, on the contrary, normally only anaphoric, but not deictic.

<sup>2</sup>. As is evident from the ungrammaticality of most of the forms in the restrictive paradigm mentioned above. See Hernanz and Brucart (1987: 150 ff.) for a brief, but precise, account of the grammar of personal pronouns. For a more detailed account, see Bolinger (1977) and Bühler (1967: 169) (especially for their deictic function).

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At this point, we may ask ourselves what theoretical legitimacy should be given to the presumed formal description of idiosyncratic syntactic behaviour. Since linguists must proceed on the basis of their knowledge of a certain category, when such a category fails to behave in a way approximating the expected pattern, it is clear that conclusions cannot be reached by reference to that expected pattern. On the whole, then, the a-systematic acceptability of the first and second plural forms of the restrictive paradigm is best seen *in the context of* other performance phenomena. There are indications that this is an area of grammar particularly prone to performance innovation. Consider in this respect the italicised strings in (29)-(30):

(29) *Us guys* are going to the cinema.

(30) Your father doesn't like *us guys*.

It will be seen that whereas (30) is perfectly respectful with the rules of grammar, (29) is definitely atypical in the selection of the personal pronoun's case.<sup>1</sup> Yet, language users say *us guys* by the side of *we guys* (though preferably the former type) in current American English.

Another disturbing fact comes from the following set of constructions:<sup>2</sup>

(31) Silly me!

(32) Good old you!

(33) We doctors.

(34) You there.

(35) We of the modern age.

(36) Us over here.

(37) You in the raincoat.

where again the presence of the restrictive expansion does not bring about acceptability problems. Indeed, we could start from (31)-(37) to refute the general belief that personal pronouns cannot take restrictive expansions, were it not for the fact that, except for a case such as *silly me*, it is again only the first and second persons plural that behave in this way:

(38) \*Silly they!

(39) \*He there.

(40) \*I of the modern age.

(41) \*They over here.

(42) \*He in the raincoat.

In the way of an explanation, the fact that the number must be plural might initially be accounted for on pragmatic grounds: one does not normally need to restrict the reference of the singular first or second persons since they are situationally inferred in the context. In the plural, however, one may be in need of defining which individuals are meant among a sizeable

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<sup>1</sup>. On the irregularity of the accusative case in structures such as *us guys*, cf. G. Kjellmer (1986: 445-449).

<sup>2</sup>. All of them are taken from Quirk et al. (1985: 352-3); in particular, from a section of their Grammar which they entitle "Modification and determination of personal pronouns".

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number of them. This would explain why the third person plural is sometimes also acceptable in its objective form, as in *I don't like them cops*. But, then, in *\*they girls* or, for that matter, *\*he the doctor*, why can we not make use of the very same mechanism in order to select the individuals in question within a group? There appears to be no answer to this, that is, no formal answer, for, the construction fails to conform to prototypical conditions for any syntactic category we may wish to associate it with.

To recapitulate, it is important to emphasize the fact that structures such as *we boys* and so on do behave atypically within the grammar of personal pronouns. Unfortunately, one cannot bypass their deviant behaviour by positing either that these pronouns are articles, or that they are part of an ordinary NP in a traditional apposition. As we have seen, the facts argue against these two interpretations. The problem lies in the fact that we have not been able to ascertain what it is that makes these constructions acceptable only in the case of the first and second persons plural, and unacceptable for most of the occurrences of all the other persons. In the absence of solid, formal criteria, we are forced to conclude, somewhat sadly, that the pattern in question must remain "a piece of" idiosyncratic syntax, a sort of mysterious island in an otherwise well-codified system of grammar. But this recognition is, it is hoped, better than formulating an intricate formal theory which after all does not fit the facts.

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