Grammars of They, Themselves, and Themself

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Today's Talk

- Let's start off with this video:

IG @hankgreen / TikTok @hankgreen1

(1) So if you want a person to tell you something about themself, I would start by telling them something about yourself

- Each pronoun could be swapped out for a different one and maintain the meaning
  - **Overarching Question: When do you get which pronouns?**

Who Says ‘They’ and When?

Collaborative Work

- Before getting into it, this work is done in collaboration with members of the SEPTA consortium (Scientific Explorations of Pronouns and Trans Acceptance)

Prof. Kirby Conrod

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“Singular They”

- English *they*-series pronouns (*them*, *their*, etc) can have antecedents that are syntactically and/or notionally singular (so-called “**singular they**”; henceforth **ST**)
  - The history of ST is long, and it has been discussed by prescriptivists and grammarians for centuries (*see Bodine 1975 for an overview*)
    - “…prior to the nineteenth century singular ‘they’ was widely used in written, therefore presumably also in spoken, English. **This usage met with no opposition**.” — Bodine 1975:132–133

(2) Almost anyone under the circumstances would have doubted if [the letter] were **theirs**… -E. Dickinson (*correspondence, 24 Sept. 1881*)

(3) The painter and the sculptor may display **their** individual genius in creations of surpassing excellence… -W.H. Prescott, History Of The Conquest Of Peru, 1847

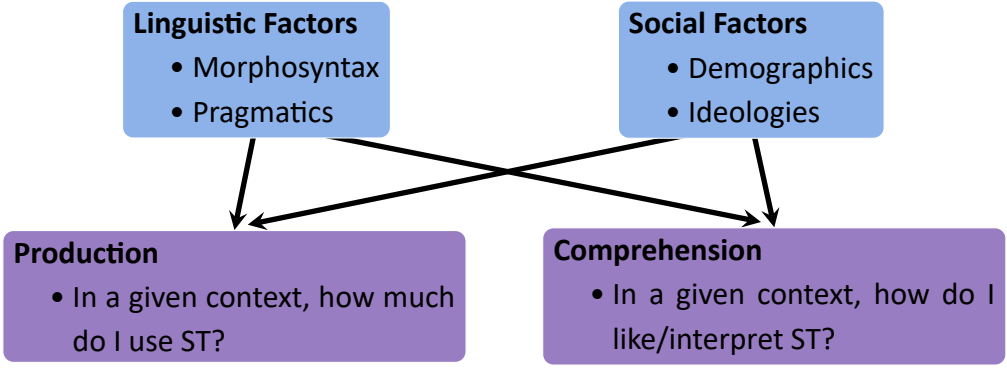
“Singular They”

- Historic usages of ST have had antecedents that are unnamed/unknown individuals or quantified groups
- In more recent years, the social context has changed, with an increase in cultural awareness of nonbinary/genderqueer folks
  - Leading to *they* getting used in reference to named/known individuals
  - Sociolinguistic variation suggests this is a new usage of *they*:
    - ST with a definite, specific, singular antecedents in the Common Ground
    - So-called “**definite singular they**” (henceforth **dST**; e.g., Bjorkman 2017, Konnelly & Cowper 2020, Conrod 2019, Camilliere et al. 2021

Factors of Variation

Core Question about Sg. They

- **Our core question in this project**: How do social/linguistic variables predict use/comprehension of ST?



Prior findings on variation with ST

- **Prior findings**: There are patterns of acceptability that are mediated by social and linguistic factors

  Ackerman 2018, Bjorkman 2017, Conrod 2019, Hekanaho 2020, Conrod et al. In press, a.o.

(4) Definite plural they: ***Those dentists*** smiled before ***they*** sneezed.

(5) Quantified/indefinite they: ***Every dentist*** smiled before ***they*** sneezed.

(6) Definite singular they: ***That dentist*** smiled before ***they*** sneezed.

	Speaker Type A	Speaker Type B	Speaker Type C
(4) Def. pl. *they*	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
(5) Quant. *they*	Proscribed	Acceptable	Acceptable
(6) Def. sg. *they*	Unacceptable	Liminal	Acceptable

Prior findings on variation with ST

- More on morphosyntactic analyses of **variation with singular they**:

Bjorkman 2017	2 grammars	Morphosyntactic analysis acceptability ~ antecedent's **definiteness/specificity**
Konnelly and Cowper 2020	3 grammars	Morphosyntactic analysis acceptability ~ antecedent's **specificity/gender features**
Conrod 2019	3 grammars	Morphosyntactic analysis acceptability ~ antecedent's **specificity/gender features**
Camilliere et al. 2021	3 grammars	Experiment (*k-means clustering, proper name antecedents*) acceptability **ratings cluster** ~ grammar

Pragmatic Effects?

- The work focused on morphosyntax has targeted syntactic features (definiteness/specificity)
  - e.g. quantified/generic vs. specific/definite
- Prediction: speaker type A will reject ST with a definite, specific antecedent reject because of the features [def] and [spec]
  - But is that sufficient to account for speaker types and their behaviors?
- We have a hunch about data like (7):

(7) My confidential informant is putting their safety in jeopardy.

A Hunch about Pragmatic Effects?

- Our hunch is that even folks who reject/don't use dST *will* accept/use it in (7)

  (7) My confidential informant is putting their safety in jeopardy.

  - Where the identity of the definite, specific antecedent is being **concealed**
  - If correct, existing analyses of variation will need to be revised

- Pointed hypotheses:

  - Using a M/F pronoun for a 3rd person singular human is **not syntactically obligatory** — for any speaker type
  - The choice of pronoun **depends on conversational goals**

- How do we go about testing this?

Socio-Pragmatic Experiments

ST Pragmatics: experimental overview

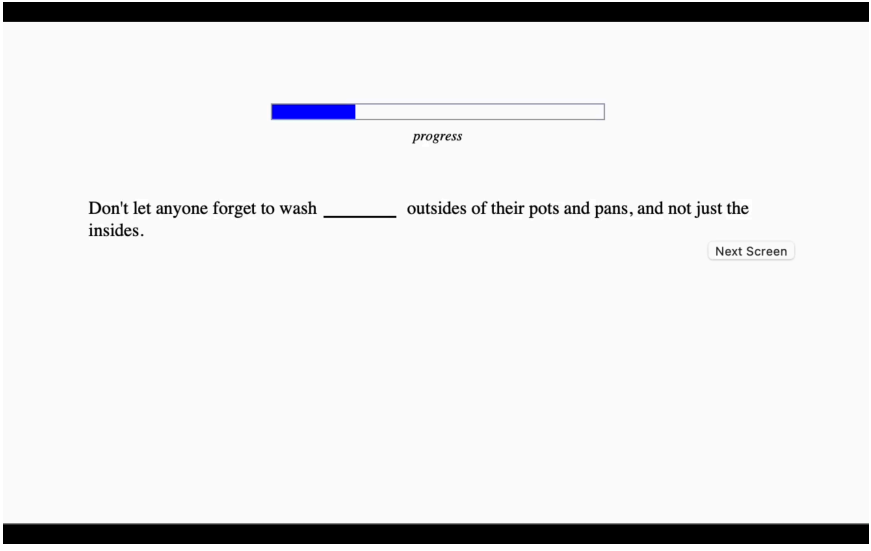
- **Research Question**: Does ST acceptability vary according to whether the speaker is concealing the identity/gender of a definite specific singular referent?

- Design:

antecedent	gender not concealed	gender concealed
common noun	My client, whose testimony we heard earlier, was not in ■ right mind …	My client, who prefers to remain anonymous, was not in ■ right mind …
proper noun	My client Casey, whose testimony we heard earlier, was not in ■ right mind …	(n/a)

  - To probe acceptability of ST in these contexts ■ = *their/his/her*
  - To probe usage of ST in these contexts ■ = blanks (stimuli)

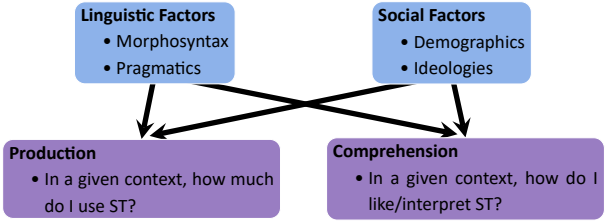
Sample of Sentence Completion Task



Some Sample Items

Exploring Social and Linguistic Factors

- Recall: linguistic and social factors matter for ST usage/acceptance



- **Question: What's social and what's linguistic?**
- Solution: **design experiments wrt linguistic variables** and **targeting participants wrt social variables**

Exploring Social and Linguistic Factors

- **"Design experiments with respect to linguistic variables"**
  - **Baseline**: acceptability of dST with names
  - **Syntactically Controlled**: definiteness, specificity, number of the antecedent
    - *Everything is definite, specific, and singular*
  - **Syntactically Controlled**: pronoun must refer to the antecedent
    - *Predicates like "do one's best" which require bound pronouns*
  - **Pragmatically Variable**: is the speaker concealing the identity of the referent?
- **Hypothesis**: even those who reject dST with names will accept dST in concealment contexts

Exploring Social and Linguistic Factors

- **"Targeting participants with respect to social variables"**
  - To identify participants for this work, we've been running a large-scale social survey
    - Identity: age, location, gender, gender orientation, LGBTQ+ affiliation, socioeconomic status
    - Ideologies: politics, gender binarism, and prescriptivism
- We have hypotheses about how these factors will influence ST acceptance

Discussion

Theoretical Impact

- Recall the previous analyses of ST grammatical variation (*see slide 9*)
  - They predict that speakers who reject a ST with a definite/specific antecedent should **always** reject it
  - ***We think we'll find this isn't true***
  - And that it depends on whether the speaker is concealing information about the referent

Theoretical Impact

- There are syntactic theories that all pronouns get their phi-features (including gender, number) from a syntactically-represented antecedent (e.g., Collins & Postal 2012)
  - They don't (obviously) predict how Gricean factors would influence pronoun choice for a definite specific antecedent
  - It's not just Gricean factors (*example from Ackerman 2019*):

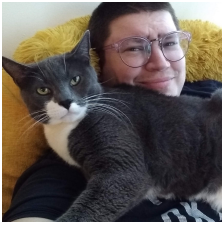
    (8) a. #At the farmhouse, the cowgirl$_i$ left his$_i$ lasso in the kitchen.
    b. At the Halloween party, the cowgirl$_i$ left his$_i$ lasso in the kitchen.

- Suggesting that **pronouns & antecedents need not match in phi-features**
  - This raises lots of questions about how we get the phi-features we get
  - *Pragmatic constraint ranking might matter (see Conrod 2019:ch.4)*

Themself? Themselves?

Collaborative Work

- Before getting into it, this work is done in collaboration with Kirby Conrod



Prof. Kirby Conrod

they/them

Singular They and Specificity

❖ Singular *they* with antecedents of variable specificity:

(9) **Every professor** praises **their** advisees daily — ***quantified***

(10) **The ideal advisor** emails **their** advisees regularly — ***generic***

(11) **My committee chair** signs **their** emails with a :) — ***definite***

(12) **Richard** submits **their** manuscripts early — ***proper name***

nb. "singular they" = has a [sg] antecedent in the syntax

❧ As we saw, previous works have found that acceptability/usage of ST depends on morphosyntactic definiteness/specificity

Reflexive Forms of Singular They

- Reflexive form of singular *they* can **variably** appear as *themself* or *themselves*:

(13) **Every professor** assesses **themself** on their teaching

(14) **Every professor** assesses **themselves** on their teaching

- *Getting this out of the way: yes 'themself' is a real word*
- *If you need confirmation from a dictionary: the Oxford English Dictionary* entry for *themself* (definition I.2)

…variably according to what?

Questions and Hypotheses

RQ1: How does **antecedent type** affect the ratings of *themself*/*ves*?

H1a: *themself* > *themselves* with more specific antecedents (*influenced by Ackerman et al. 2018*)

H1b: *themselves* > *themself* with less specific antecedents

RQ2: What **speaker variables** (*macrosocial categories; ideological beliefs*) affect ratings of *themself*/*ves*?

H2a: *themself* ↗ with {nonbinary, younger, less prescriptive, less gender binarist}

H2b: proper names antecedents (for either) ↗ with those folks (*influenced by Conrod 2019*)

RQ3: Are there clear or coherent **'dialect groups'** that align with how people rate *themself*/*ves* with different antecedents?

H3: speakers will divide into 3 dialect groups: conservative, intermediate, and innovative (*influenced by Konnelly & Cowper 2020's work on singular they*)

Preview: Theoretical consequences

What can we conclude about English grammar from this data?

- There is variation in how speakers accept themself/themselves
  - **Variation itself will be informative!**
- But how they vary is constrained by phi-matching mechanisms
  - **The mechanisms themselves vary, across dialect groups**

Phi-features of antecedents are not deterministic for phi-features in reflexive anaphors

Background

Bkgd: morphosyntax of English number

Some English Pronouns

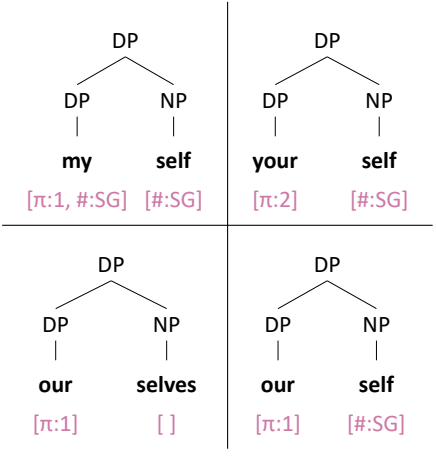
me	[π:1, #:SG]
us	[π:1]
you	[π:2]
her	[#:SG, g:FEM]
them	[ ]

- **Number phi-features**
  - Pronouns like *my* or *her* are [#:SG], but pronouns like *they* and *our* **lack a # feature**

    (*cf. Bjorkman 2017, Konnelly & Cowper 2020, Conrod 2019*)
  - **Interpretation** and (absence of) SG:
    - Lacking a # feature can be consistent with referring to a single individual

      (*cf. Sauerland et al. 2005, Sauerland 2008, Wiltschko 2008*)
- ***A null hypothesis***
  - *Constant across dialects: phi-feature specifications for pronouns **and** how they are interpreted*

Bkgd: morphosyntax & -self reflexives



- There are **two nominals** inside the -self reflexive

  (*see Postal 1966, Helke 1973, Ahn & Kalin 2018*)

- Each nominal has its own **independent phi-features**
  - Note the distribution of SG
  - [SG] self can be used with plural pronouns (*i.e. those without a number feature*) like *your*, *our*, and … *them*
    - *Ourself* is well attested (Stern 2019)

Bkgd: phi-matching

- 3 nominals: antecedent, pronoun, -self — which need to match in phi-features?
  - Ahn 2019: there are many cases of pronoun-antecedent mismatches

    (15) If I were you, **I** would get **your**self a good lawyer

- What about the other two nominal pairs?

  (16) should **we** be bracing **our** **self** for that
  [π:1] [π:1] [#:SG] (*from Showbiz Tonight; COCA*)

- And what do we find in speaker judgments for *themself*/*themselves*?

Pilot Experiments

Pilot Study

Two-part pilot task

- **Online survey** conducted using Qualtrics
- **Large-scale** (n=1,127) reach, via social media and Prolific

Demographics and ideology survey

- **Demographics**: Age, gender, location, languages
- **Prescriptivism scale**: how prescriptivist are you? (8 questions)
- **Binarist scale**: how much do you believe there are exactly 2 genders? (3 questions)

Ratings survey

Pilot Task: Ratings Survey

- **Design**:
  14 conditions — 2 pronoun types (*themself* or *themselves*)
  × 7 antecedent types:

Quantified indefinites	**Quantified universals**	**Generic definites**	**Distal definites**	**Specific indefinites**	**Proximal definites**	**Proper names**
Anyone who wants a good grade…	*Every person on this planet…*	*The ideal candidate for this job…*	*The driver of that car over there…*	*An employee at the movie theater…*	*The person I talked to yesterday…*	*Alex, who is quite short, …*

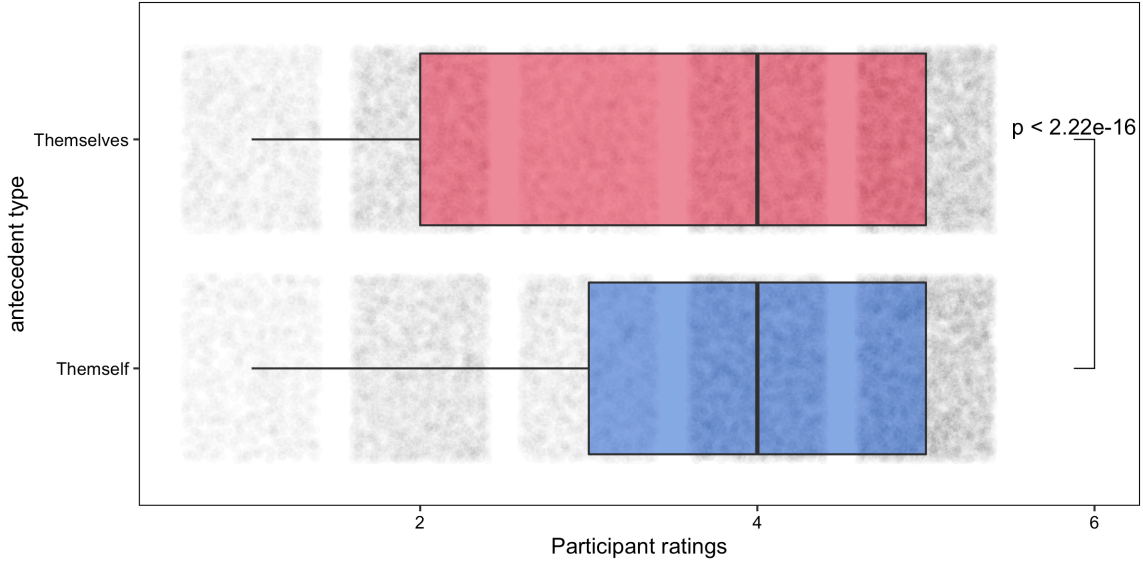
× 2 sentences per condition = **28 total sentences rated**

- **Question**: "How natural or unnatural does this sentence sound?"
  - **Likert scale of 1 (*very unnatural*) to 5 (*very natural*)**

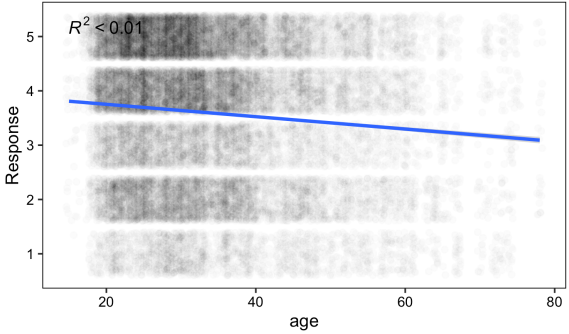
Preview of Pilot Task Results

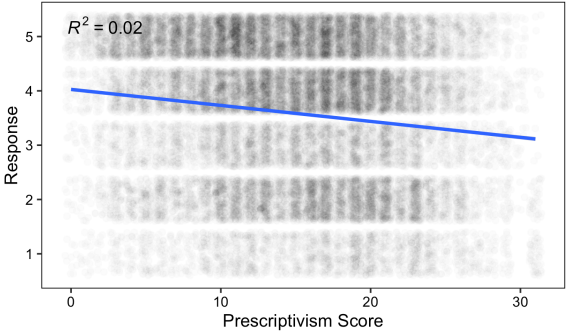
- **Demographics**:
  - Age, gender, and ideology scales had an impact on ratings
- **Antecedents**:
  - Impacted ratings, but not readily apparent if *themself/-selves* is collapsed
  - Effects of antecedent specificity on ratings not gradient — proper names stood out
- **K-groups**:
  - 3 clusters of participants (based on ratings) were found; interactions with demographic and grammatical variables

Pilot Task Results: starting point

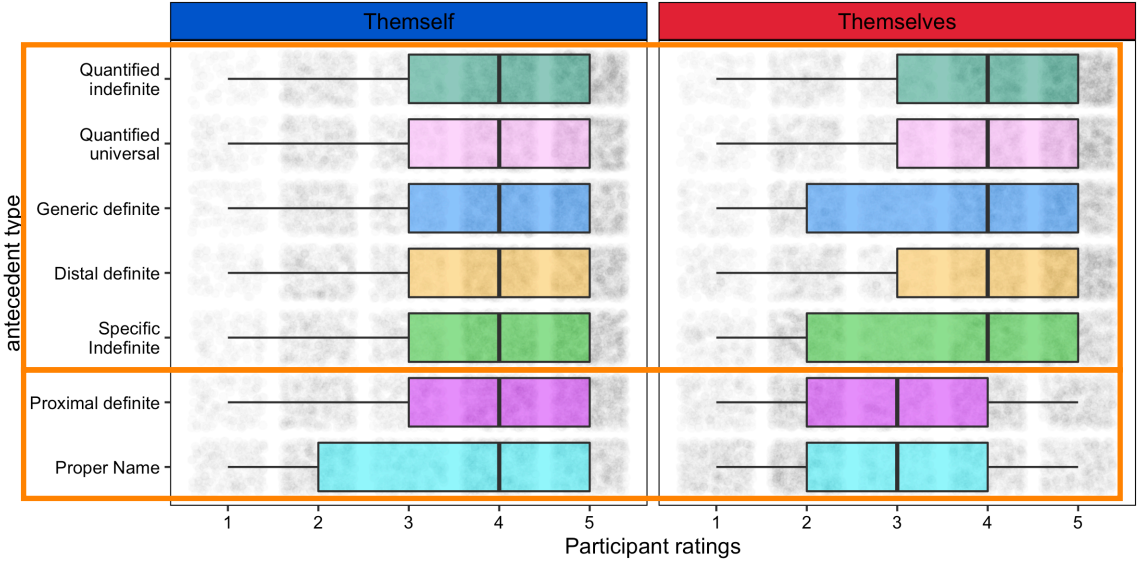


Pilot Task Results: age and prescriptivism

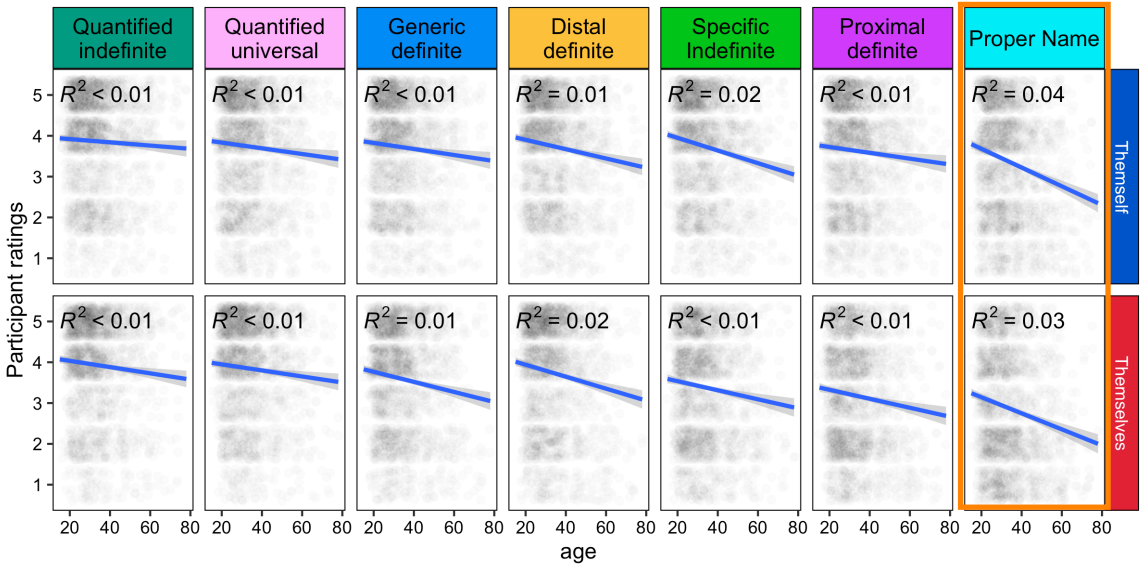




Pilot Task Results: antecedent type × *-self / -selves*



Pilot Task Results: age and prescriptivism



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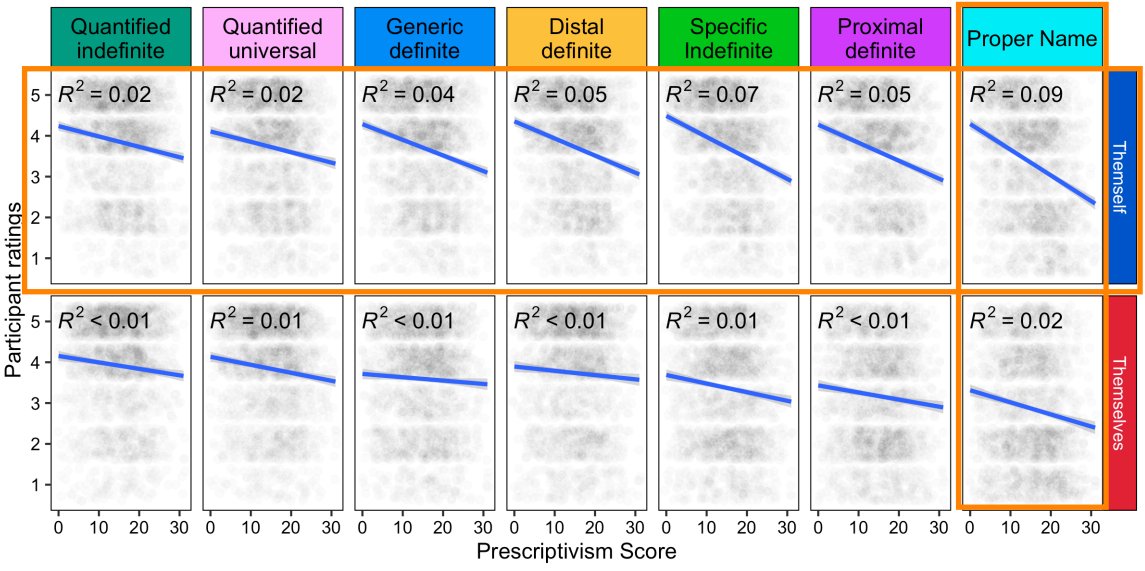


Are there dialects?

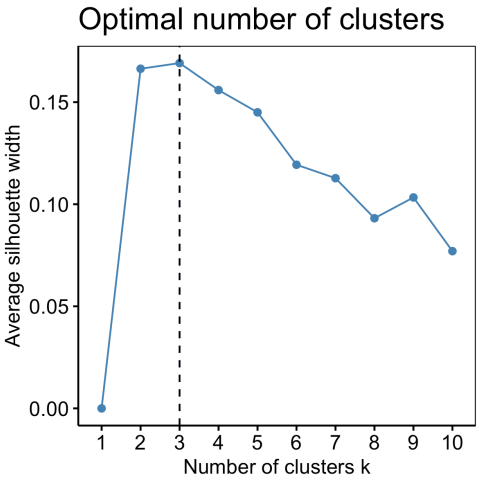
“K-groups”

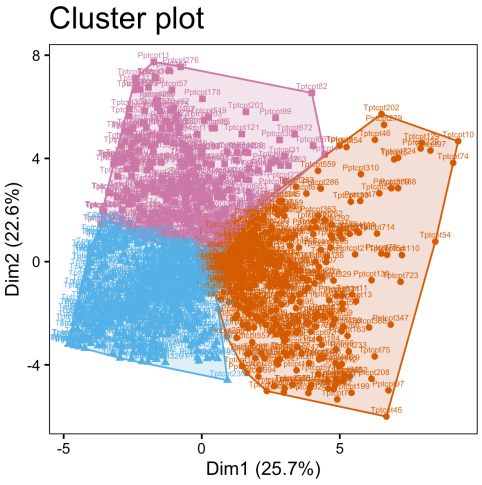
- Clusters of participants that emerge based on a Machine Learning algorithm

Basics of process:

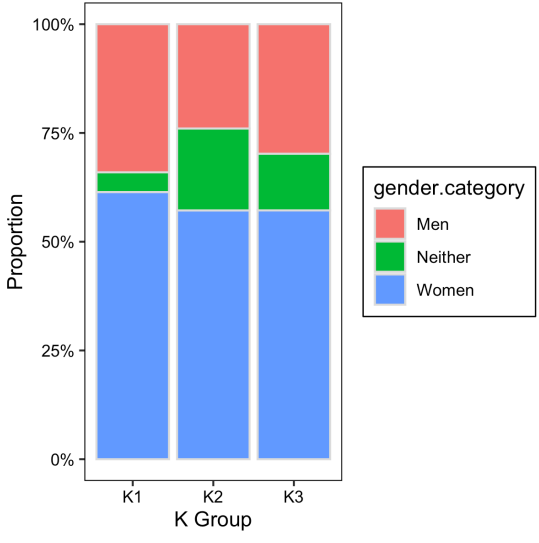
- **Input**: numerical ratings of sentences, grouped by participant
- **Algorithm**: unsupervised classification based on numerical means
- **Output**: grouped participants

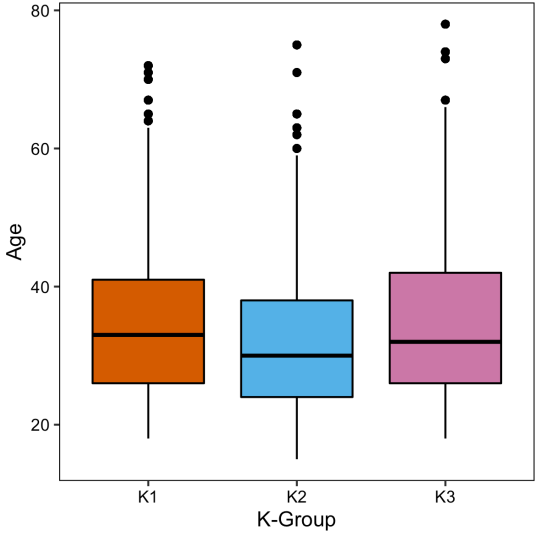
Pilot Task Results: k-groups





K-Groups... Who Are They?





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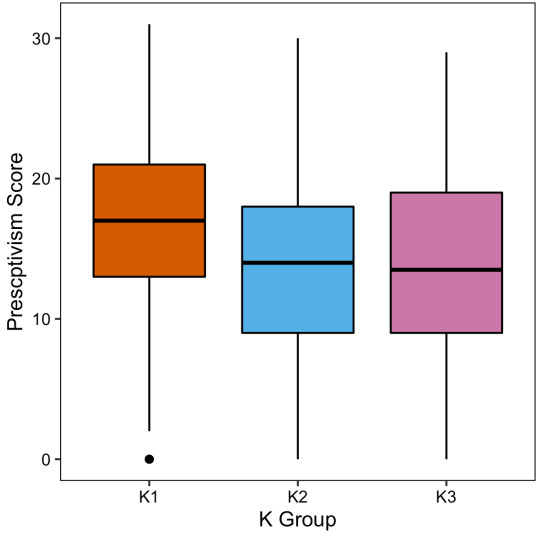
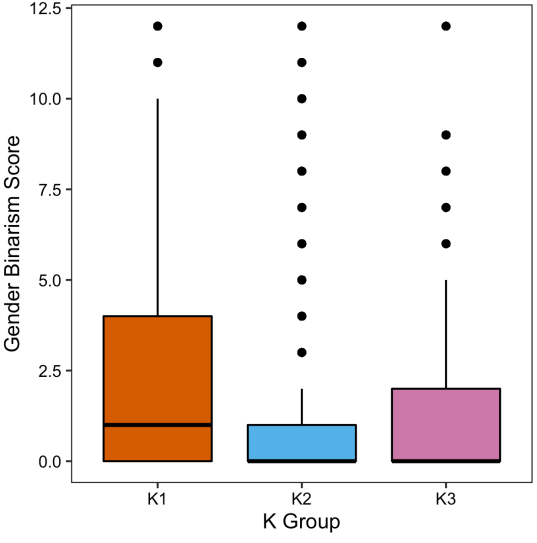
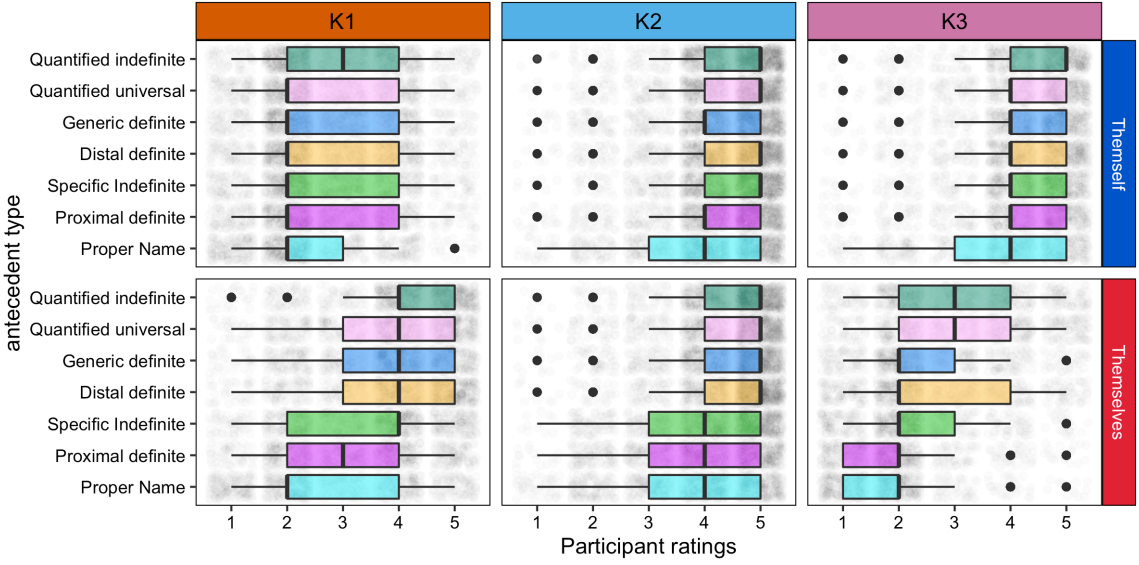




Results by K-Groups: Grammatical Effects



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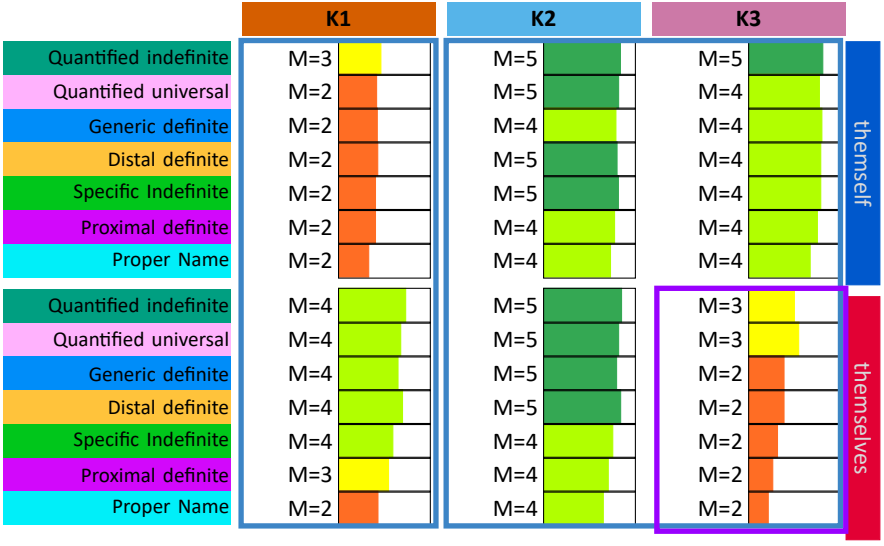


In Progress: refined experimental follow-up!

This pilot task is ***exploratory*** and calls for more robust and methodologically sound experimental techniques

In Progress: Repeated design, with some changes

- Online survey using **PC Ibex** → open-source repository of materials
- Acceptability judgments using **continuous sliders** → sharper statistical analyses
- Antecedent types reduced to **three** → more confidence in results
- **Fillers and controls** → more confident in what's (un)acceptable
- **Latin square design** → everyone sees every condition in a balanced way

Results: STAY TUNED

Discussion

Return to Questions

RQ1: How does **antecedent type** affect the ratings of *themself*/*ves*?

H1a: *themself* > *themselves* with more specific antecedents (*influenced by Ackerman et al. 2018)*

H1b: *themselves* > *themself* with less specific antecedents

- As presupposed, acceptability of themself vs themselves **depends on antecedent type**
  - Without interaction with antecedents, *themself* vs. *themselves* were very similar
  - Antecedents differ syntactically (*functional structure*) and pragmatically (*specificity*)
- Which is preferred when **depends on dialect**
  - H1a only true for K3
  - H1b only true for K1

Return to Questions

RQ2: What **speaker variables** (*macrosocial categories; ideological beliefs*) affect ratings of *themself/ves*?

H2a: *themself* ↗ with {nonbinary, younger, less prescriptive, less gender binarist}

H2b: proper names antecedents (for either) ↗ with those folks (*influenced by Conrod 2019*)

- **Both confirmed**: age, prescriptivism, gender binarism, and gender all had significant effects on ratings (*in the direction predicted!*)
  - ✧ (Note that the social variables with the biggest effect on k-group are also the social variables that affected ratings [as in H2a,b])

Return to Questions

RQ3: Are there clear or coherent **'dialect groups'** that align with how people rate *themself/ves* with different antecedents?

H3: speakers will divide into 3 dialect groups: conservative, intermediate, and innovative

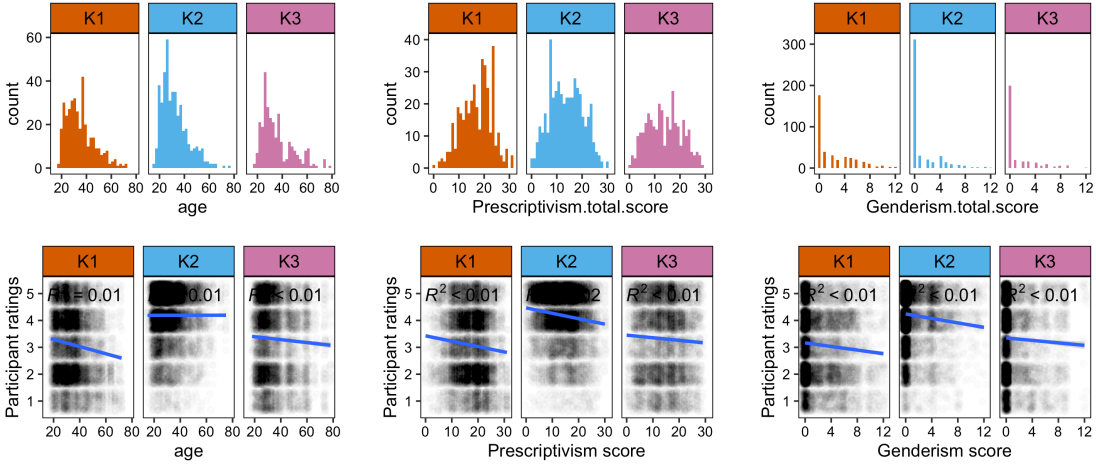
(*influenced by Konnelly & Cowper 2020's work on singular they*)

- **We did find 3 groups — but along different dimensions**

K1	**Conservative**	Themself << Themselves	*(but proper name antecedents generally bad)*
K2	**Innovative (A)**	Themself ≈ Themselves	*(proper name antecedents had highest variability)*
K3	**Innovative (B)**	Themself >> Themselves	*(themselves is best with quantificational antecedents)*

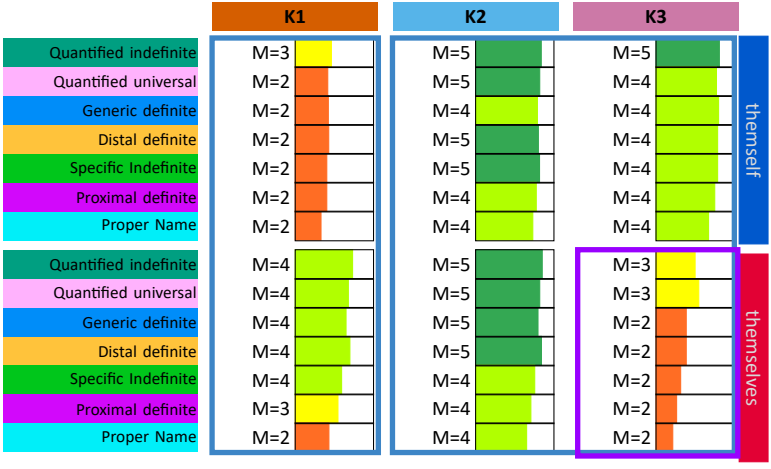
Bigger Discussion: Grammar and Demographics

K-group membership is independent of demographic variables



Bigger Discussion: Grammar and Demographics

- There are **different grammars of English**, varying on how to deal with [sg]-anteceded genderless 3rd person reflexives



Bigger Discussion: Grammar

- There are **different grammars of English**, varying on how to deal with [sg]-anteceded genderless 3rd person reflexives
- 2 potential parameters: one for *they* and one for *-self*

	Can I use a pronoun w/ no [gender] (*they*) with a definite specific antecedent?	When can I use *-self* wrt the antecedent/pronoun?
K1	definite specific antecedents require a gendered pronoun	*-self* requires [SG] on the pronoun
K2	*yes: def. spec. antecedent ok with they*	*—any timeA: no requirements—*
K3	*yes: def. spec. antecedent ok with they*	[SG] antecedent requires [SG] on *-self*

PREDICTION: K1 is currently defined only by tolerance of singular *they*, not *-self/ves*. K1 might actually contain two groups – a group who can tolerate *ourself* (a pronoun lacking [sg] + *-self* is okay), and another group who cannot.

Some Takeaway Messages

Takeaway Messages

Methodological takeaway

- With sufficient ratings + sociolinguistic data, **K-means clustering can help disentangle** what variation is due to…
  - linguistic (grammatical) influences,
  - social influences,
  - or interactions between them

Takeaway Messages

Grammatical takeaways

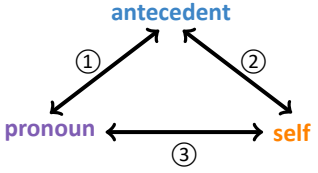
- English **reflexive phi-matching is pretty complex** (and in some ways variant across dialects!)
  - Phi-matching between reflexive pronoun and antecedent
    - → *Can a pronoun have fewer features than its antecedent? Sometimes!*
  - Phi-matching between pronoun and -self inside self-reflexives
    - → *Can the -self have more features than the pronoun it's attached to? Sometimes!*

Theoretical Impact

- There are **different grammars of English**, varying on how to deal with [sg]-anteceded genderless 3rd person reflexives
  - Expected for language change in progress where **input can underdetermine plausible grammatical systems** in learner
    - (*see Conrod 2019's findings about change in progress for singular they*)
  - Analysis: **Differing in reflexive phi-feature matching** (microparameter settings / constraints formalizations)
    - (*Coming right back to this…*)

New Question: Feature Matching in Binding

- The generalizations we've found for *self*/*selves* suggest that there are three phi-(mis)matching relationships in English reflexive binding:



  - [SG] *-self* may need to match the antecedent (②, K3) or the pronoun (③, K1)
  - [ ] *they* may require a [SG] antecedent to be indefinite/nonspecific (①, K1)

- **BIG QUESTION**: What structures and mechanisms predict these different patterns?

More Binding Mismatches

Phi-Mismatches in Antecedents and Anaphors

- A statement or presupposed premise about (English) reflexive binding (see discussion in Sundaresan 2018):

  (17) Reflexive expressions phi-match the local antecedent of binding.

  - Found in textbooks (e.g., Adger 2003:94, Carnie 2013:10, Sportiche et al. 2013:160, Fromkin et al. 2014:168)
  - Found in key works on binding (e.g., Hornstein 2001, Safir 2004, Reuland 2006, Heim 2008, Hicks 2009, Kratzer 2009, Rooryck & Vanden Wyngaerd 2011)

- The patterns with *themself* could jibe with (17), if we do some phi-feature gymnastics
  - But up ahead we have more damning evidence against (17)

Number mismatches in *-self*

- We've seen number mismatches with *-self* and a plural pronoun, but it can also mismatch in number with the antecedent

(18) **You guys** pushed your**self**, drove your**self**, sacrificed, trained and competed. (PL > SG; *M.Romney 2002*)

(19) [*Spoken about a group of individuals*]

a. **The football team** organizes the weekly tailgate it**self**.

b. **The football team** organizes the weekly tailgate them**selves**. (SG > PL)

(20) We all need to ask our**self** [a very serious question]. (PL > SG; *ABC Nightline*)

Person/Number mismatches in the pronoun

- The pronoun can mismatch against the antecedent in person/number features

(21) [*Spoken by a woman in a group of women*]

a. **Each of us** has chosen for **herself**.

b. **Each of us** has chosen for **our**selves/**our**self. (3.SG > 1.PL)

c. **Each of us** has chosen for **them**selves/**them**self. (3.SG > 3.PL)

(22) [*Spoken to a group of men*]

a. **At least one of you** has perjured **him**self.

b. **At least one of you** has chosen for **your**self. (3.SG > 2)

c. **At least one of you** has chosen for **them**selves/**them**self. (3.SG > 3.PL)

Swapped Identity Contexts

(23) [*Speaker A is going to the airport shortly, and asks Speaker B whether it's a good idea to bring food or buy food on the plane. B replies...*]

a. If I were you, **I**'d do **my**self a favor and bring food!

b. If I were you, **I**'d do **your**self a favor and bring food! [1.SG>2]

(24) a. If I were you, **I** wouldn't worry **my**self/**your**self

b. If we were you, **we** wouldn't worry **our**selves/*__your__selves

c. If you were me, **you** wouldn't worry **your**self/*__my__self

(25) [*There's a new neighbor in the building, and it's not clear that the new neighbor knows that it's noisy at night in this neighborhood...*]

a. If I were her, **I**'d get **my**self/*__her__self some earplugs.

b. If I were him, **I**'d get **my**self/*__him__self some earplugs.

c. If I were them, **I**'d get **my**self/%__them__self/%__them__selves some earplugs.

Swapped Identity Contexts

- Median scores from a pilot task (1="unnatural"; 5="natural")

		Pronoun					
		1.S	2.S	3.S	1.P	2.P	3.P
Ant.	1.S	–	**4**	2.5	–	**5**	**4**
	1.P	–	2	2	–	2	2

- **Key takeaway: There are grammatical constraints on mismatch**
  - But how precisely to model these patterns is **not clear**

Overall Conclusions

Consequences for Syntactic Theory

- Phi-feature matching is Weird for English pronominals
  - In reflexives alone, we've seen…
    - SG antecedent $\sim$ PL pronoun
    - SG/PL antecedent $\sim$ SG *-self*
    - 3rd antecedent $\sim$ 1st/2nd/3rd pronouns
    - 1st antecedent $\sim$ 1st/2nd/3.PL pronouns
  - Reflexive feature matching is one of the key arguments for English having syntactic gender features at all

Gender in English

- The assumption that English is (*secretly*) a grammatical gender language is pervasive in generative syntax/semantics
- **Idea**: gender is possible on all Ns but just never pronounced
  - This predicts "*my daughter … herself/#himself*"
  - … but fails (*without fancy footwork*) at our mismatches
- It's even been proposed that **all** pronouns must match in phi-features with some syntactic representation of the antecedent *(cf. Collins & Postal 2012's "ultimate antcedent")*
  - But we've seen with the ST data that context intervenes in a way that isn't obviously predicted

Gender in English

- Gender features could be postulated if they are optional (*not going to decide that here today*)…
  - **Stronger suggestion**: pronouns (reflexive or not) in English **do not** depend on phi-matching with an antecedent
- **BIG QUESTION**: What structures and mechanisms predict these different patterns?

Thanks and Acknowledgments

Thank you!

Thanks to the rest of the Scientific Explorations of Pronouns and Trans Acceptance (SEPTA) consortium of labs, the past and present RAs in these labs, Kirby Conrod for all their guidance, and Lauren Ackerman, Brian Dillon, Laura Kalin, and Matt Wagers for helpful discussions.

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