Demonstrative surprises!

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1 Introduction

A property typically observed about English demonstratives is that they come in two forms, singular and plural:

(1)  
   a. this car, these cars  
   b. that car, those cars

This makes them unusual among English determiner elements. Other determiners, such as the definite and indefinite articles, have a unique form that does not alternate for number. But if we look carefully at the singular forms and compare them to the plurals, we see that the alternation is not typical of other English singular–plural pairs for at least three reasons: a) three of the four demonstrative forms display word-final -s and one of those is a singular form (this); b) word-final -s is voiced in the plural and voiceless in the singular; c) the vowel in the singular forms does not match that in the plural forms. I will not adopt the idea that demonstrative word-final -s is a plural marker.

Curious and yet well known, plural distal demonstratives in many vernacular varieties of English are morphologically accusative:

(2)  
   them cars

Generalizing from such vernacular varieties of English, I will suggest that English demonstratives bear morphological case quite generally, perhaps a vestige of their historical development. In this way, they resemble personal pronouns in English. Pursuing this parallel with personal pronouns, I will also suggest that English demonstratives express person.

2 Demonstratives: accusative and nominative

As seen above, vernacular varieties of English include demonstrative forms that display accusative morphological case (them guys ‘those guys’). Probably less known is the fact that nominative case is displayed on demonstratives in some other vari-
eties of English. This supports the idea that morphological case is not exceptional for demonstratives.

2.1 Accusative demonstratives

The plural distal demonstrative in Appalachian English (AppE) and African American English (AAE) bears morphological accusative case in nominative, accusative, and oblique contexts, independent of the structural case of the DP:¹

(3) a. They watch you like a hawk, *them* prisoners does. (AppE; M&H 2004)
   b. So, when *them* son-of-a-guns checked me, I had to pay taxes on all that money.
   c. And *them* clerks all has, has learned me, and they talk about *them* cats, “Are you gonna kick *them* cats right on?”
   (fieldwork; Mountain City, TN, 2008)

(4) a. *Them* boys call theyselves playing basketball. (AAE; Green 2002)
   b. Half of *them* things that be showed on TV don’t be happening.

Schütze (2001: 206) (see also Pesetsky 2013: 73–74) applies the idea of ‘default case’ to the possibility of an accusative form in a non-accusative context with personal pronouns in English (examples from Schütze):

(5) Left dislocation: *Me/*I, I like beans.
(6) Ellipsis: Who wants to try this game? *Me/*I.
(7) Gapping: We can’t eat caviar and *him/*he beans. (Siegel 1987)
(8) Coordination: Us and *them/*We and they are gonna rumble tonight.
(9) a. Modified pronouns: The real *me/*I is finally emerging.
    b. Postpronominal modification: We/Us linguists are a crazy bunch.

Schütze’s notion of default case is not “determined by syntactic mechanisms” (p. 206). I will not generalize the idea of default case to demonstratives (and Schütze himself never discusses demonstratives). For one thing, the case to be considered the default for demonstratives varies across varieties of English. In fact, there may be more than one case represented within a paradigm.

¹ Montgomery & Hall 2004 is abbreviated as M&H.
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2.2 Nominative demonstratives

In Older Scots (OS) and also Scots, the plural distal demonstrative is *they* (not *them*),\(^2\) also reported for Devon English (SW England) and English of the “far North” (Beal 2010: 48):\(^3\)

\[(10) \text{In } \text{thai caicis the richts...that ony of the saids parties hes.} \]
\[\text{‘in they (‘those’) cases the rights...that any of the said parties has’} \]
\[(OS; 1544, DSL)\]

\[(11) \text{In } \text{thae days ye cuid buy a gey lot for sixpence.} \]
\[\text{‘in they (‘those’) days you could buy a very lot for sixpence’} \]
\[(Scots; \text{Purves } 2002)\]

\[(12) \text{A lyke aipils, but } \text{thae is no verra guid.} \]
\[\text{‘I like apples, but they (‘those’) are not very good’} \]
\[(Scots; \text{Purves } 2002)\]

\[(13) \text{Look at } \text{they spiders.} \]
\[\text{‘look at they (‘those’) spiders’} \]
\[(Devon English; \text{Milroy } \& \text{Milroy } 1993: 65)\]

Although the plural distal demonstrative displays morphological nominative case in Scots, personal pronouns display morphological accusative in several contexts, including with conjoined DPs:

\[(14) \text{Hir an me never gat on that weill.} \]
\[\text{‘her and me never got on that well’} \]
\[(Scots; \text{Purves } 2002)\]

\[(15) \text{Me and Shon was haein a tram thegither in the Crown Hotel.} \]
\[\text{‘me and John was havin’ a dram (of whiskey) together in the Crown Hotel’} \]
\[(Scots; \text{Purves } 2002)\]

Morphological accusative forms of conjoined DPs (in nominative contexts) are familiar to speakers of various varieties of English; nominative demonstratives are apparently not. The Scots examples show that although personal pronouns and demonstratives display case, it is not necessarily the same one and in neither instance does it correspond to structural case. Perhaps the overlap in some vernacular Englishes, where both sets of elements allow accusative (e.g., personal pronoun: *them* and *me*; demonstrative: *them guys*), is just a coincidence.

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\(^2\) Caroline Macafee (p.c.) informs me that accusative demonstrative forms are not part of Scots.

\(^3\) All Older Scots examples are from *Dictionary of the Scots Language* http://www.dsl.ac.uk.
2.3 Genitive demonstratives?

Both Older Scots (OS) and Scots have a proximal plural demonstrative that resembles the 3rd person plural genitive pronoun of General English (i.e., *their*):

(16) Thar-for is to be chosyne ane Of thire men that has...gane With ws;
   ‘therefore is to be chosen one of these men that has...gone with us’
   (OS; DSL, 1380)

(17) Thir MacDonalds are settling for a quarrel.
   ‘these MacDonalds are aiming for a quarrel’
   (Scots; DSL, 1931)

(18) Thir is real guid tatties!
   ‘these is real good potatoes’
   (Scots; Purves 2002)

King (1997: 169) states that the origin of Older Scots *thir* is obscure, but perhaps comes from Old Norse *their*. The presence of yet another morphological case for demonstratives may seem surprising. But once we see case as the norm for English demonstratives, it all starts to fit together.

What we’ve seen so far is that across vernacular varieties of English, *th-* forms functioning as demonstratives can display morphological case. This morphological case is independent of structural case and there is no support for positing a default case with demonstratives. In the next section, I’ll suggest that the idea of morphological case is valid for General English as well.

3 General English (*this*, *that*, *these*, *those*)

General English displays four demonstrative forms that encode number as well as proximity to the speaker:

(19) a. *this* book (sg., proximal)
    b. *that* book (sg., distal)
    c. *these* books (pl., proximal)
    d. *those* books (pl., distal)

The *-s (/*/s/* or */z/*) of the plural forms is often taken to be a plural marker. But then why does the singular form *this* also display *-s*? The idea I pursue is that the vowel alternation rather than the presence of *-s* signals the number change. Such a pattern is already attested in irregular plurals in English:

(20) a. goose - geese
    b. thesis - theses
    c. foot - feet
    d. tooth - teeth
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So if word-final /s/ or /z/ is not a demonstrative plural marker, what is it? I propose that the /s/ or /z/ of these forms is the genitive -s, a ‘defective genitive’. I use the label ‘defective’ because these forms do not behave syntactically like genitives nor do they have the right sort of semantic relationship with the head noun, and neither do the accusative and nominative demonstrative forms we saw above. Nevertheless, the prenominal position in English is one that can host a genitive (’s) form.

These considerations lead me to the following proposed generalization about General English demonstratives:

(21) General English demonstratives display defective morphological genitive.

There are four reasons for thinking that this is plausible:

A. Demonstratives appear in prenominal position, a position hosting genitive pronouns and also genitive lexical DPs in English.

B. Demonstratives and 3rd person plural pronouns have overlapping histories and functions in English. The personal pronouns still display case morphology, including genitive case morphology, even while other DP elements (nouns, adjectives, articles) no longer do. So perhaps the General English demonstratives display morphological genitive as well.

C. The /s/ or /z/ of this, these, and those, may resemble the /s/ or /z/ of its, his, and Mary’s. We can think of those as parallel to whose in terms of its internal structure (th- + genitive ’s, wh- + genitive ’s).

D. Other European languages (e.g., Polish) have genitive demonstratives. And demonstratives were marked for case, including genitive case, in earlier stages of English.

If word-final -s is a genitive marker for General English demonstratives, why does singular distal that lack -s? The answer may lie in the comparison with personal pronouns. Specifically, that resembles her, a suppletive form corresponding to the accusative that also functions as a possessive. (Note that like her, that is the most versatile of the demonstratives; see Kayne 2014.) So perhaps that is also a suppletive form.

4 Personal pronouns as demonstratives

In Section 2, on the basis of case considerations, the comparison was made between personal pronouns and demonstratives. In this section, I will strengthen this comparison with other shared properties:

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4 The th- forms of 3rd person plural pronouns (they, them, etc.) replaced the native h- forms of Old English under the influence of Scandinavian languages in the north (Howe 1996).
A. When used prenominally, both personal pronouns (in (22a)) and demonstratives (in (22b)) agree with a head noun in number:

(22)  
   a.  _us_ kids  
   b.  _them_ kids

B. Both personal pronouns and demonstratives can appear without an overt noun:

(23)  
   a.  pronouns: _we, us, you_  
   b.  demonstratives: _that, those, these_

C. Both personal pronouns and demonstratives have systematic lexicalized forms with (reduced) _one_ in several varieties of English:

(24)  
   a.  _you’uns, we’uns, us’uns, they’uns, them’uns, this’un, that’un_  
      (AppE: M&H 2004)  
       
   b.  _yousuns, usuns, themuns_  
      (Belfast English; _Henry 1995_)  
   c.  _yous’uns, thaim’uns_  
      (Ulster Scots; _Robinson 1997_)  
   d.  _you yins, huz yins_ (_’us’_), _us yins_  
      (Scots; _DSL_)

D. Both appear with reinforcers (_here, there_), which are essentially locative in nature and dependent on the demonstrative or personal pronoun (_Bernstein 1997, Leu 2015_):

(25)  
   a.  _These here guys_ won’t do it.  
   b.  _Us here guys_ ain’t never gonna play like that.  
      (from _Kayne 2009_: fn. 20)\textsuperscript{5}

E. Both provide reference in terms of (relative) proximity to the speaker or addressee.

F. Both display person morphology (1st, 2nd, 3rd) if _Bernstein (2008a,b)_ are right about _th-_ as a person marker.

That demonstratives can display person is illustrated quite clearly in Turkish, a language whose demonstratives are ‘built’ on the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person pronominal forms (_Kornfilt 1997_, cited in _Leu 2015_: 38–39). The Turkish personal pronouns are illustrated in (26) and the related demonstratives in (27).

\textsuperscript{5} Compare: *?_You there guys ain’t never gonna play like that._ (from _Kayne 2009_: fn. 20).
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(26) Turkish pronouns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
<th>3rd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominative</td>
<td>ben</td>
<td>sen</td>
<td>o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accusative</td>
<td>ben-i</td>
<td>sen-i</td>
<td>on-u</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(27) Turkish demonstratives:

- bu(n) ‘this one’ (close to the speaker and hearer)
- su(n) ‘that one’ (further away from speaker and hearer)
- o(n) ‘that one’ (far away from speaker and hearer)

So the insight that emerges from consideration of the English facts, inspired by the Turkish data in (26) and (27) above, is that English demonstratives, like personal pronouns, encode case, person, and number and furthermore, that English has th-demonstrative forms (these guys, them guys, etc.) as well as 1st and 2nd person demonstrative forms (us guys, you guys). This characterization helps to make sense of some verbal agreement facts in Appalachian English. In particular, Appalachian English displays two agreement patterns: a) verbal -s is triggered with 1st, 2nd, or 3rd (th-) person demonstratives (including plural forms); b) null agreement is triggered with 1st, 2nd, or 3rd (th-) person personal pronouns:

(28) Personal demonstratives

a. Then we-uns ketches up and finishes him. (AppE; M&H 2004)
b. ...and if you fellows wants to preach up there. (M&H 2004)
c. Them gals is purty, but they’re crazy as Junebugs. (M&H 2004)

(29) Personal pronouns

a. ...we need more changes in Mountain City... (fieldwork; Mountain City, TN, 2003)
b. Any...questions that you want to ask me? (fieldwork; Mountain City, TN, 2003)
c. They’re ill little fellows, them black jackets is. (M&H 2004)

The ideas developed here also offer new insight into the definite article the in English. While it’s not novel to observe that the is an impoverished form, we can ask exactly how it is impoverished. No number is expressed or encoded (explaining why the appears with singular and plural nouns), and morphological case is also absent. If the ideas put forth here are correct, then the only feature that the displays

6 The h-pronouns (he, him, etc.) trigger verbal -s. I have claimed elsewhere (see Bernstein 2008a,b) that h- is not a person marker in present-day English.
is person. This is evidently not sufficient for the definite article to serve as a pronoun or demonstrative, or to be an independent form.

References


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