

# Demonstrative surprises!

Judy B. Bernstein  
*William Paterson University*

## 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:<sup>1</sup>

- (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.

<sup>1</sup> 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*),<sup>2</sup> also reported for Devon English (SW England) and English of the "far North" (Beal 2010: 48):<sup>3</sup>

- (10) In *thai* caicis the richts. . .that any of the saids parties hes.  
'in they ('those') cases the rights. . .that any of the said parties has'  
(OS; 1544, DSL)
- (11) In *thae* days ye cuid buy a gey lot for sixpence.  
'in they ('those') days you could buy a very lot for sixpence'  
(Scots; Purves 2002)
- (12) A lyke aipils, but *thae* is no verra guid.  
'I like apples, but they ('those') are not very good' (Scots; Purves 2002)
- (13) Look at *they* spiders.  
'look at they ('those') spiders'  
(Devon English; Milroy & 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) *Hir* an me never gat on that weill.  
'her and me never got on that well' (Scots; Purves 2002)
- (15) *Me* and Shon was haein a tram thegither in the Crown Hotel.  
'me and John was havin' a dram (of whiskey) together in the Crown Hotel'  
(Scots; 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.

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 ettling 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.<sup>4</sup> 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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<sup>4</sup> 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](#)).



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(26) Turkish pronouns:

	1st	2nd	3rd
Nominative	<i>ben</i>	<i>sen</i>	<i>o</i>
Accusative	<i>ben-i</i>	<i>sen-i</i>	<i>on-u</i>

(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:<sup>6</sup>

(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

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

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