

IT'S I, IT'S ME: FURTHER REFLECTIONS

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In a recent issue of this journal Peter Erdmann (1978:67—80) made a number of interesting observations, on the basis of a corpus-based analysis of some 40 recent British novels, on the distribution of the pairs of pronominal forms *I/me*, *he/him*, *she/her*, *we/us*, and *they/them* in contemporary British English, concluding that “the pronominal system has changed from a morphologically to a syntactically determined subsystem” and that “formally, the two series of pronouns of present-day English can be described as distinguishing an unmarked from a marked series, with *I*, *he*, *she*, *we* and *they* representing the latter” (1978:79). The purpose of the present brief note is to suggest that Erdmann, while on the right lines, has not pushed his own analysis far enough or perhaps rather that data drawn from literary texts, albeit often containing representations of informal speech, do not point out sufficiently clearly the direction in which the language seems to be moving.

Two general points should be made at the outset. Firstly, the distribution of *I/me* has surely never been “morphologically determined”. What Erdmann in fact attempts to demonstrate is that the selection of one or other exponent from within the paradigm of first person pronouns in English is no longer determined, as it once was, by one particular syntactic factor — namely the function of the relevant NP within the sentence — but rather by certain other factors which he documents. The syntactic function of an NP within an English sentence, once widely marked by the use of suffixal morphology, has of course come to be marked instead by means of word order and prepositions. Prescriptive grammarians would have us believe that personal pronouns form a significant exception to this general development: Erdmann believes, rightly, that this is not so.

The second general point concerns Erdmann's use of the terms ‘marked’ and ‘unmarked’. It is certainly the case that the ‘oblique’ set (*me*, *him*, *her*, *us*,

them) are now used in the majority of contexts and the 'nominative' set (*I, he, she, we, they*) in far fewer. Erdmann argues, however — and we shall agree with his general conclusion though not with certain important details — that the use of *each* set is syntactically determined, albeit with more or less free variation in certain contexts in certain registers. It is *not* the case that these syntactic oppositions are neutralized in certain circumstances and that one set — the oblique set — is then used in preference to the other; consequently, the use of the terms 'marked' and 'unmarked', simply on frequency grounds, does not seem appropriate.

Let us now turn to the position in contemporary English, taking as common ground Erdmann's claim that 'case' is no longer the determining factor in selecting *I* or *me*. First of all, we should set aside one of the structures examined by Erdmann (1978:70—71), namely non-finite noun clauses, where as he himself points out the choice is between *me* and *my*, not *me* and *I*; the structure is thus irrelevant to the point at issue, being rather an illustration of the gradual predominance in contemporary English of a binary structure incorporating subject to object raising (Stockwell *et al.* (1973:557—62): *I can't recall+S: he came*→*I can't recall him coming*) over a structure in which the nominal aspect of the *-ing* form was still sufficiently strong for any 'subject' of the gerund to appear in surface structure in the form of a determiner, i.e. as a nominal modifier (*I can't recall his coming*). (The new sequence may then be seen as generalizing to the far less common subject and dislocated structures such as *Him coming on time amazed me/It amazed me, him coming on time*, so that in purely synchronic terms we may say that the (pronoun) subject of a gerund appears in surface structure in the oblique form; this fits in exactly with the view of the distribution of *I/me* about to be propounded).

The main claim in this paper is that popular spoken English (at least) is moving towards a situation in which the use of *I* and *me* is indeed distinguished syntactically, but in a much simpler way than Erdmann suggests. The more formal registers, as ever, lag behind, and the less than wholly clear picture found in Erdmann's data and faithfully reported by him results from a conflict between the older and the newer *états de langue*. The conflict is intensified in this case by the particular attention which prescriptivists and pedagogues have paid to the point at issue, so that even highly educated native speakers are often at a loss as to the appropriate form to use, one form being felt to be 'incorrect' and one to be 'stilted'. As always in such a situation, hypercorrections abound, as we shall see.

Our claim is in fact very simple: that the language, despite the heavy retarding influences just mentioned, is moving towards — and I stress the dynamic nature of the process at the present time — a situation in which the distinction between *I* and *me* is precisely that between 'conjunctive' and 'disjunctive', in the sense of the term used by grammarians of French, 'clitic'

and 'non-clitic' to use more widely current terms. In this analysis, *I* will in due course be reserved solely and exclusively to contexts where it is directly bound to a main or auxiliary verb form within a finite verb phrase as its subject (exactly like *je* in French): in all other contexts, *me* will be appropriate (cf. French *moi*).

A quick glance at the various contexts surveyed by Erdmann, makes it clear how close this situation already is, even in (relatively informal) literature. It clearly covers his elliptical constructions (*Who did it? Me/not me*), use after *as* and *than* (even when ambiguity arises, showing just how strong the structural pressure is: cf. Erdmann's example (14) *John liked his brother more than me*) and equative constructions (*it's me*); we shall make no further reference to these structures here. Two contexts examined by Erdmann need further attention, however, and we shall look at these now.

Co-ordinated noun phrases show a wide variety of combinations of 'nominative' and 'oblique' forms in Erdmann's corpus (1978:69-70). The striking thing is that, for this native speaker at least, the 'oblique' forms are possible in every instance, albeit at times in a *very* relaxed or juvenile register, (e.g., *him and me/me and him had a great battle*), although of course *he and I* and *him and I* (but not apparently **he and me/*me and he*?) are widely attested also. In some cases, the selection of a particular order (e.g., *me and Peter* as opposed to *Peter and I/me* but not **I and Peter*) seems to exclude the 'nominative' form but the oblique forms do not appear to be restricted in the same way. From this, and from all kinds of hypercorrections such as the widely attested *between you and I* and structures such as *he says he saw you and I last night* (Quirk *et al.* 1972:§ 4. 112), we can hypothesize that the language is seeking to move towards a structure where co-ordinate subjects have as their exponent the non-clitic form of the pronoun (cf. *me and her, we just never got on together*, where the clitic form *we* is optional in English, unlike, say, French). This process is however being constantly impeded by the pressure for 'subjects' to be 'nominative', this half-remembered pattern leading to hypercorrection and inconsistency.

The second complex area analysed by Erdmann (1978:75-78), cleft sentences ('focussed constructions'), provides more interesting data in favour of our hypothesis. Firstly, when the pronominal complement of the copula verb is the (deep) subject of the following embedded clause, the 'nominative' forms are particularly resistant, occurring in 99 out of the 119 examples in Erdmann's corpus; a typical attestation might be *it was she who finally touched my arm*, taken ultimately from Huxley (Erdmann 1978:76). But here too the new pattern is found: *it should be me that has changed* (Bowen, cited by Erdmann). This pattern is widely attested in relaxed registers: cf. *it was him that/as did it*. We note and accept Erdmann's observation (1978:78) that verbal concord with this 'subject' (e.g., *It is I who am...*) is 'rare' and "a feature of polished, formal

English". This suggests that the subject of the embedded sentence is now generally taken to be the relative pronoun, that the two surface structure clauses are thus rendered structurally more independent, and the first element is then much closer to the equative structures mentioned earlier: compare *it's me* with *it's me that wants him* or with the ultra-formal *it's I who want him*.

Our analysis predicts of course the ultimate victory — prescriptivism and tradition permitting — of the *me* form in this as in the other structures. Supporting evidence for this view comes from the ('incorrect') use of the *I* form in cases where the pronoun is the underlying object, direct or prepositional, of the embedded clause. Contrast informal *it's not me you want* with ultra-correct (or is it hyper-correct?) *it's not I who(m) you want*. One finds strange hybrids like this example from Updike (Erdmann 1978: 77) *it was she Harold had always been afraid of*. Here, even moderately formal registers would certainly prefer *it was her (that) Harold had always been afraid of*.

So what may we conclude? Quite simply that the ultimate distribution of *I/me* seems likely to be directly parallel to that of *je/moi* in French, the former being restricted to clitic position within finite verb phrases and the latter used elsewhere. Note how the use of *me* with gerunds, discussed above, is wholly consonant with such an analysis. While this evolution is virtually complete in many contexts, such as elliptical constructions, as a simple copula complement, after *as/than*, etc., strong prescriptive insistence on *I* as a 'nominative' form is impeding change wherever *I* is still felt to be a subject, especially within co-ordinate noun phrases and as the 'deep' subject in cleft sentences. Here, too, however, *me* is gaining ground but slowly and amidst uncertainty and hyper-correction. In sum, then, Erdmann is right to see *I* and *me* as syntactically distinguished; by adopting a dynamic view of the present state of English, however, one can enrich his analysis by seeing the various patterns he describes as part of a conspiracy to attain the target of a very simple and straightforward distribution of the form in question.

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