

Your ass is a universal pronoun*

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March 16, 2003

1 Introduction

- In many colloquial dialects of English, there exists a pronominal expression of the form Possessive Pronoun+*ass*.
- The expression is not simply a combination of possessive pronouns + *ass*; it is semantically non-compositional, since *your ass* can do things that *an ass* cannot do.¹

- (1) (a) Your ass wrote one great comic book. (=You wrote one great comic book.)
- (b) I thought your ass graduated. (=I thought you graduated.)
- (c) Rundgren's shit is only fuckin' good when his ass sings pop....You and I see shit the fuckin' same way. I can dig partying with your ass. [rec.music.progressive, 03-12-98] (=he sings pop, I can dig partying with you)
- (d) Cuz I changed my PW to my AIM cuz his ass logged on and had actual conversations with people...I know his ass loves me and he should know how much I love him. [<http://27.sugar-amour.com/archives/00000076.html>] (=he logged on, he loves me)
- (e) The poster claimed that HE paid for gas. In reality, every time his ass drives his car where he doesn't need to go, WE pay for it... [alt.fan.rush-limbaugh, 07-02-1997] (=He drives his car)
- (f) their asses sure know how to fuckin' jam. kick ass guitar, whaling keys, and fuckin' screeching ass voices! dig it. fuckin' a. after the fuckin' jam was over my ass handed the old chick her ten fuckin' bucks....his ass claimed that his old lady gave him the fuckin' bucks to fuckin' buy an ice cream sandwich....i told his ass i needed the fuckin' money in order to fuckin' buy some beer. shit. my ass ain't ready to rip off texaco quite yet. [alt.music.yes, 04-01-2000] (=They know, I handed, I told him, I'm not ready)

*We would like to thank David Beaver, Emily Bender, Lev Blumenfeld, Iván García, Andrea Kortenhoven, Jacques Laffleur, John Rickford, Tom Wasow, Arnold Zwicky for their useful comments and suggestions, and we'd especially like to thank Paul Kiparsky for his support and lively discussions. We'd also like to thank James Isaacs for first pointing out to us that *your ass* has binding properties. The ideas and discussion in this paper are as always our own responsibility, and we mean that more than ever before. Both authors contributed equally to this paper; the order of authors is entirely alphabetical by last name.

¹We use naturally occurring examples wherever possible. These were collected via searches with *Google* of newsgroups and web text, and are listed with their original reference.

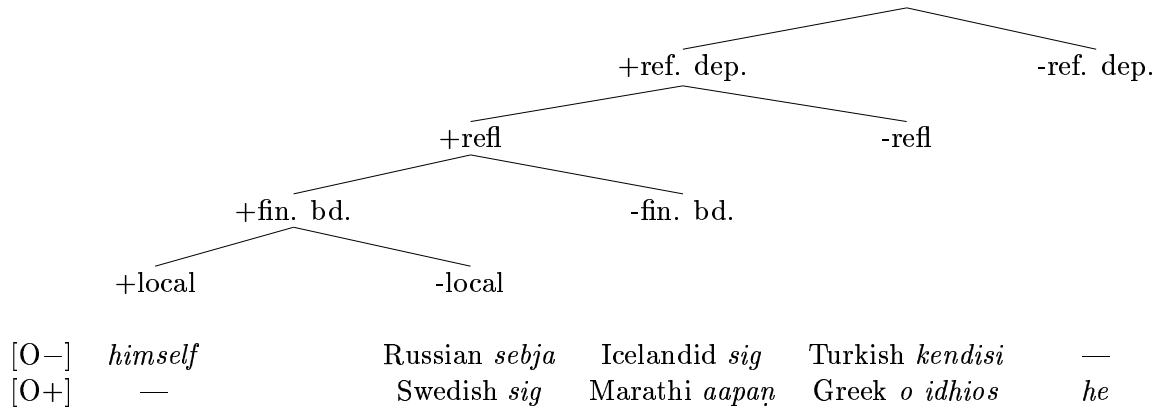
- (g) i got woken up by my exboyfriend. it was nearly 2 in the morning... and his ass called me, what the hell is that??..
[\[http://misseyerah.blogspot.com/2002_11_03_misseyerah_archive.html\]](http://misseyerah.blogspot.com/2002_11_03_misseyerah_archive.html)
 (=He called me)

- The issue is that *your ass* appears in both reflexive and pronominal binding domains.
 - (2) (a) John_i saw [his ass]_i/himself_i/*him_i in the mirror.
 (b) John_i thinks that Mary loves him_i/[his ass]_i/*himself_i
 (c) His ass/he/*himself got fired last week.
 - (3) (a) But most people do believe OJ_i bought his ass_i/himself_i/*him_i out of jailtime.
 [soc.culture.china, 01-28-2002]
 (b) First Newton, Alexander, and Moore make an ass out of Pangborn_i. The more he_i whined about it, the more they nailed his ass_i/him_i/*himself_i. [soc.men, 04-23-99]
 (c) his ass/he/*himself claimed that his old lady gave him the fuckin' bucks to fuckin' buy an ice cream sandwich.... [alt.music.yes, 04-01-2000]
- We consider these facts from the perspectives of two types of binding theories, broadly speaking.
 - Partition theories, partition the space of pronominals and impose constraints on their binding domains.
 - Blocking theories, which rely on the elsewhere principle (Burzio, 1999, Kiparsky, 2002).
- These facts are problematic for both types. We discuss these problems, and possible solutions.

2 Kiparsky's pronominal typology

- Kiparsky (2002, p.200ff) proposes a hierarchy of binding domains based on four increasingly specific criteria (see tree in (4)), with blocking governing the interaction among them.
- REFERENTIAL DEPENDENCE: Concerns requirement of having a discourse antecedent. Referentially dependent pronouns require a discourse antecedent, and referentially independent pronouns do not (cf. (5a)).
- REFLEXIVITY: Referentially dependent pronominals are either non-reflexive, allowing for a syntactic or discourse-based antecedent, or reflexive, requiring a syntactic antecedent (cf. (5b)).
- FINITE BOUNDEDNESS: Reflexive pronouns may be either finite-bound, requiring an antecedent in the same finite clause, or not finite-bound, allowing for the possibility of being bound by an antecedent outside of the finite clause (cf. (5c)).
- LOCALITY: Finite-bound pronominals may be either locally-bound, requiring an antecedent in the "first accessible subject domain", or not (cf. (5d,e)).

(4) Kiparsky's pronominal typology



- (5) (a) We need to talk about him_i / $*himself_i$, him_j / $*himself_j$, and her_k / $*herself_k$.
 [pointing] (Referential independence)
 (b) $John_i$ is here. I saw him_i / $*himself_i$. (Referentially dependent, non-reflexive)
 (c) $John_i$ thought that I would criticize him_i / $*himself_i$. (Reflexive, non-finite-bound)
 (d) $John_i$ asked me to criticize him_i / $*himself_i$. (Finite-bound, non-local)
 (e) $John_i$ criticized $himself_i$ / $*him_i$. (Local) (Kiparsky, 2002, p.201)

- Blocking determines what type of pronominal is used when: in a particular binding domain, pronominals with more specific binding domains block the use of pronominals with less specific binding domains.
- For instance *himself* has a more specific binding domain than *he* in English.
- If English had something like the Swedish *sig*, *himself* would block use of it in finite bound local domains, while *sig* would block use of *him* in finite-bound non-local environments.
- Each of the binding domains is cross-classified for the property of ‘obviation.’

(6) OBVIATION
 Coarguments have disjoint reference (Kiparsky, 2002, p.2)).

- An obviatee is a pronominal that must obey obviation, and a proximate is one that need not obey obviation. In English, the distinction is that between pronouns and reflexives.
- Notably absent in (4) are two types of pronominals.
 - obviatee locally bound pronominals. These are presumably a theoretical impossibility since obviation is by definition non-local.
 - Also missing is a proximate referentially independent pronoun, i.e. a pronoun that, effectively is compatible with any domain and is thus a sort of “universal pronoun” (Kiparsky, 2002, p.27).

3 *Your Ass* and the Pronominal Typology

- *Your ass* can be used in all of the binding domains in (5), suggesting that it is Kiparsky's missing "universal pronoun."
 - (7) Referential independence
 - (a) On the agenda for today is to talk about his ass_i , his ass_j , and her ass_k . [pointing]
 - (b) I mean her ass, over there.
 - (8) Referentially dependent, non-reflexive
 - (a) Please explain to me is Bobby V_i a good coach or not....His $_i$ team has less infield errors than anyone else, give his ass_i some credit. [alt.sports.baseball.ny-mets, 08-25-99]
 - (b) brittney, you stupid....do you realy (sic) think my man mase is realy (sic) gonna reply to your stupid shit...mase $_i$ is a horn dog, his ass_i fucks all his girls, ... [rec.music.hip-hop, 01-09-98]
 - (c) I think if Mike and Buzz had their way, he'd $_i$ be outta there. Mike hates his ass_i and Don knows it. The only think worse than listening to Dennis $_i$ is listening to Bart and Freida. [alt.fan.don-n-mike, 06-16-2000]
 - (9) Reflexive, non-finite-bound
 - (a) I had one guy tell me the change was for gas, the box, and I bought his ass_i a coke while he waited in a long line.... [alt.toys.gi-joe, 05-11-02]
 - (b) First Newton, Alexander, and Moore make an ass out of Pangborn $_i$. The more he $_i$ whined about it, the more they nailed his ass_i . [soc.men, 04-23-99]
 - (10) Finite-bound, non-local
 - (a) John $_i$ asked me not to criticize his ass_i .
 - (b) Mary $_i$ told me to buy her ass_i a diamond ring.
 - (11) Local
 - (a) You $_i$ bought your ass_i a lap-dance? [alt.angst, 08-31-00]
 - (b) Don't give up! I am 30 and was ag. for a little over a year until I $_i$ got my ass_i some help... [alt.support.agoraphobia, 06-15-99]
 - (c) But most people do believe OJ $_i$ bought his ass_i out of jailtime. [soc.culture.china, 01-28-2002]
 - A PROBLEM: *your ass* poses a serious problem for a theory such as Kiparsky's since it seems not to be subject to blocking. The blocking principle predicts that *your ass* should be blocked by reflexives in local binding domains.

4 Semantics of *Your Ass* and Blocking

Your ass has additional semantics that other pronominals don't that may save blocking:

- *your ass* can be used only in the proper social setting (acting as a marker of that setting)
- *your ass* carries additional semantics about relationships between participants and referents in the discourse

4.1 On the social meaning of *your ass*

- *your ass* can be used only in certain social settings; there are many social settings in which it is simply not appropriate, e.g. in a nice restaurant, at church, in a conference talk, etc.
- Spears (1998, p.236) argues that the meaning of *your ass* is “social and abstract” and that it “marks a discourse as being in U[ncensored] M[ode]”, i.e. in a social context where expressions that would be inappropriate elsewhere (namely, in censored contexts) are neutral with respect to appropriateness (Spears, 1998, p.232).
- Thus, *your ass* marks a discourse as being in a particular mode/social setting in a way that standard English pronominals do not.

4.2 On The Non-Social Meaning of *Your Ass*

Your ass and other English pronominals are not simply interchangeable, even when one is already in the proper social context.

- *Your ass* can mark a negative connotation for the *ass*-marked referent (on a relative scale):

- (12) (a) I am gonna knock your ass down the hill. [rec.climbing, 08-18-01]
(b) I am gonna knock you down the hill.

This type of negative use of *your ass* seems to be among the most common types, and characterizes most of the examples we have given above.

- *Your ass* can also mark positive connotations for the *ass*-marked referent (on an absolute or generic scale):

- (13) (a) brittney, you stupid....do you realy (sic) think my man mase is realy (sic) gonna reply to your stupid shit...mase is a horn dog, his ass fucks all his girls, ... [rec.music.hip-hop, 01-09-98]
(b) ...mase is a horn dog, he fucks all his girls...

A better understanding of the semantics of *your ass* will require much more examination of naturally occurring data. However it should be clear that *your ass* carries meaning that other English pronominals don't, at a social and linguistic level.

4.3 The Interaction of Semantics and Blocking

We aren't presenting a formal account of how the semantics interacts blocking, but the basic ideas are:

- Blocking doesn't apply. No strict specificity relationship holds between the reflexive and *your ass*, since one has a more specific domain and the other a more specific meaning.
- In the OT account of Kiparsky, this could be done by assuming:
 - *your ass* has additional meaning over other pronominals, overtly encoded.
 - There is a very highly ranked constraint requiring this meaning to be overtly realized if possible (following e.g. Kuhn (2001)).
 - *himself* always loses on semantic grounds regardless of domain specificity.

5 Non-Blocking Theories of Binding

Alternatives to blocking theories (Chomsky, 1981, Reinhart and Reuland, 1993, Pollard and Sag, 1994):

- Assume a discrete partitioning of the space of pronominal types.
- No blocking occurs, instead conditions are imposed on the distribution of the different equivalence classes.

Your ass causes problems for these theories as well. For instance looking at the Reinhart and Reuland (1993) approach:

- Two features, R(eferential independence) and Refl(exivizing function), yield four pronoun types (one unattested):

(14)

	R+	R-
Refl+	\emptyset	SELF
Refl-	<i>him</i>	SE

- Three conditions govern distribution:
 - Condition A: A reflexive-marked syntactic predicate is reflexive
 - Condition B: A reflexive semantic predicate is reflexive-marked
 - Chain Condition: A maximal A-chain $(\alpha_1, \dots, \alpha_n)$ contains exactly one link — α_1 — that is both +R and Case-marked

But the data in (7)-(11) shows that *your ass* may occur in any argument position any other pronoun can, and therefore does not fall into any of the four pronominal classes.

- Solution #1:
 - Assume that *your ass* is an instance of a generic pronominal underspecified for R and Refl. However, allowing underspecification expands the space of possible pronouns from four to nine:

(15)

	R+	R-	R+/-
Refl+	\emptyset	SELF	\emptyset
Refl-	<i>him</i>	SE	??
Refl+/-	\emptyset	??	<i>your ass</i>

- At least two logical possibilities, a referentially dependent pronoun unmarked for reflexivity and a non-reflexive unmarked for referential independence, are currently (as far as we know) unattested in this typology.
- Therefore the empirical data doesn't support underspecification.
- Solution #2:
 - Assume more conditions that deal with semantics, as outlined above.
 - This would also require assigning *your ass* to one class or another of pronouns, which, given its distribution, is likely to be stipulative or create polysemy.

6 Concluding remarks

- First and foremost, *your ass* is a pronoun.
- *Your ass* fills in an unattested pronominal type in Kiparsky's typology save for blocking violations.
- When expanded to include semantics, the blocking principle still holds, albeit in some new form.

∴ *Your ass* is a universal pronoun. QED.

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