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# The Proper Treatment of *Your Ass* in English

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ABSTRACT. Reflexives (e.g. *himself*) and pronouns (e.g. *him*) are usually distinguished by categorical conditions on their binding domains. However, there is a class of English expressions of the form Possessive Pronoun+*ass* (e.g. *your ass*) which we demonstrate to have pronominal properties but which appear to have unrestricted binding domains. We explore the problems such expressions pose for different types of binding theories and how an appeal to the unique meaning of *ass*-pronouns can resolve potential domain specificity conflicts.

## 1 Introduction

In many colloquial dialects of English, there exist pronominal expressions of the form Possessive Pronoun+*ass*, which we collectively refer to as *your ass*. Examples of this pronominal expression are given in (1.1).<sup>1,2</sup>

- (1.1) (a) 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)
- (b) 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)

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<sup>2</sup>Although we both have native intuitions about *your ass*, we 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.

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- (c) their asses sure know how to fuckin' jam. kick ass guitar,  
whaling keys, and fuckin' screetching 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)

The expression is not simply a combination of possessive pronoun + *ass*; it is semantically non-compositional, since *your ass* can do things that *an ass* cannot do. This can be seen most clearly in examples such as (1.1c). It's not literally their *asses* that know how to jam, but rather the people in question. Likewise, the speaker did not literally hand ten dollars to the woman with his buttocks; the speaker merely means that he handed her the money, presumably with his hands. The non-compositionality of *your ass*, in addition to other data we consider below, leads us to conclude that *your ass* is not a simple possessive pronoun+NP expression (PossNP). Rather, we argue, it is a pronoun, of a somewhat peculiar type, since it appears in both reflexive and pronominal binding domains, contrary to the predictions of many binding theories, as shown in (1.2).

- (1.2) (a) But most people do believe  $OJ_i$  bought his  $ass_i$ /himself<sub>i</sub>/\*him<sub>i</sub>  
out of jailtime. [soc.culture.china, 01-28-2002]  
(b) First Newton, Alexander, and Moore make an ass out of  
Pangborn<sub>i</sub>. The more he<sub>i</sub> whined about it, the more they nailed  
his  $ass_i$ /him<sub>i</sub>/\*himself<sub>i</sub>. [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]

In what follows, we first argue that *your ass* is a pronoun rather than simply a PossNP. We then consider its binding properties from the perspective of Kiparsky's (2002) binding theory, which actually predicts some of its peculiar properties, though also potentially causing problems for this theory as well. We examine further data showing both that *your ass* is not easily accommodated in alternative theories (particularly Reinhart and Reuland (1993)), and that it can be accommodated within Kiparsky's theory, once semantic factors are taken into account.

## 2 The Pronominality of *Your Ass*

In this section we present evidence that *your ass* is indeed pronominal rather than a PossNP. Unfortunately, there appears to be no standard non-theory-

internal definition for a pronoun; rather pronominals tend to be identified by clusters of distributional properties and then defined in theoretical terms (e.g. as referential entities that obey certain principles). We shall not attempt to offer any autonomous definition of a pronominal, but instead show that *your ass* patterns more like complex reflexives than PossNPs by a variety of syntactic and semantic criteria. We start by differentiating two readings: the non-literal (referring to a person) from the literal (referring to someone’s backside). Focusing on the non-literal *your ass*, the main distinction between it and PossNPs is compositionality: *your ass* shares reference with its possessive determiner, unlike all other PossNPs, e.g. *your ear*, *your car*, *your preferred syntactic theory*, and *your mother* refer to ears, cars, theories, and mothers rather than the hearer. This can be seen in examples like (1.3) and (1.4):

- (1.3) (a) John<sub>i</sub> bought [his<sub>i</sub> ear/mother/neck]<sub>j≠i</sub> a car.  
 (b) John<sub>i</sub> bought [himself/his<sub>i</sub> ass]<sub>i</sub> a car.

In (1.3a) the recipient is the ear, mother, or neck, and never John, while it is only John in (1.3b) on the intended non-literal reading. If *your ass* were a PossNP this would be surprising since in no other PossNP does a verb predicate of the possessor rather than the possessed (i.e. assign a  $\theta$ -role to the pronoun in [Spec,DP] rather than the DP itself).

Furthermore, *your ass* has unique properties when serving as the antecedent of other pronouns:

- (1.4) (a) John<sub>i</sub>, his ass<sub>i</sub> upset himself<sub>i</sub>/\*him<sub>i</sub>.  
 (b) John<sub>i</sub>, his<sub>i</sub> grade/mother/broken back upset him<sub>i</sub>/\*himself<sub>i</sub>.

If *his ass* in (1.4a) were a PossNP then the purported possessive pronoun would be licensing the reflexive, something possessors in other PossNPs cannot do, as shown in (1.4b). This referential behavior is identical to reflexives, which are also non-compositional.

Another argument for the pronominality of *your ass* is that in general, PossNPs allow for a wide range of modification by adjectives, PPs, and relative clauses as in (1.5a), whereas *your ass*, like pronominals, shows a more limited modifiability, generally allowing pre-nominals (e.g. (1.5b) like *self* reflexives ) but not relative clauses or PPs (e.g. (1.5c,d) also like *self* reflexives).

- (1.5) (a) Your unkempt jacket on the coat rack that you got from your mother needs mending.  
 (b) Get your bad/ugly/own self/ass outta here.  
 (c) The doctor saw his finger with the ring/that he broke yesterday.

- (d) \*The doctor saw himself/his ass from Houston/that stopped by three times last week.

Finally, PossNPs can license  $\bar{N}$ -ellipsis whereas reflexives and *your ass* cannot (coindexation is intended to indicate “sense” coreference and not strict coreference):

- (1.6) (a) Mary had her [car/house/office painted]<sub>*i*</sub>, and Jane had hers *e<sub>i</sub>* entirely remodeled.  
 (b) \*Mary had herself<sub>*i*</sub>/her ass<sub>*i*</sub> committed, and Jane had hers *e<sub>i</sub>* released.

Given the evidence presented here, it is clear that *your ass* is a pronominal, not a regular PossNP. The superficial similarity between *your ass* and a PossNP is not surprising, however, since complex pronominals in a variety of languages (including English *himself*) are often grammaticalized PossNPs formed from a possessive pronoun+some body part (Faltz, 1985, Schladt, 2000). Typically these grammaticalize to reflexives as the PossNP type construction serves as a way of placing the pronominal (as a possessive) in a non-argument position and thus exempting it from binding constraints. In this sense it might also be best to view *your ass* as being on a cline of pronominal grammaticalization, patterning closer to pronominals than PossNPs.<sup>3</sup>

### 3 Pronoun Typology and the Elsewhere Principle

Kiparsky (2002, p.200ff) proposes a hierarchy of binding domains based on four increasingly specific criteria. The broadest criterion is referential dependence, wherein referentially dependent pronouns require the presence of a discourse antecedent, and referentially independent pronouns do not (cf. (1.7a)). Referentially dependent pronominals, in turn, are either non-reflexive, allowing for a syntactic or discourse-based antecedent, or reflexive, requiring a syntactic antecedent (cf. (1.7b)). 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. (1.7c)). Finally, finite-bound pronominals may be either locally-bound, requiring an antecedent in the “first accessible subject domain”, or not (cf. (1.7d,e)).

- (1.7) (a) We need to talk about him<sub>*i*</sub>/\*himself<sub>*i*</sub>, him<sub>*j*</sub>/\*himself<sub>*j*</sub>, and her<sub>*k*</sub>/\*herself<sub>*k*</sub>. [pointing] (Referential independence)

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<sup>3</sup>Interestingly, according to Holm (2000, 226) the word for “buttocks” in several creole languages also shows at least reflexive uses, if not pronominal ones as well (Holm notes only a reflexive use).

- (b) John<sub>i</sub> is here. I saw him<sub>i</sub>/\*himself<sub>i</sub>. (Referentially dependent, non-reflexive)
- (c) John<sub>i</sub> thought that I would criticize him<sub>i</sub>/\*himself<sub>i</sub>. (Reflexive, non-finite-bound)
- (d) John<sub>i</sub> asked me to criticize him<sub>i</sub>/\*himself<sub>i</sub>. (Finite-bound, non-local)
- (e) John<sub>i</sub> criticized himself<sub>i</sub>/\*him<sub>i</sub>. (Local) (Kiparsky, 2002, p.201)

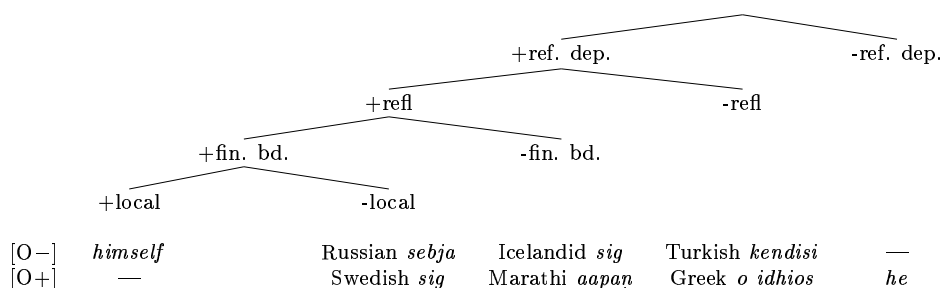
Each domain is cross-classified for the property of ‘obviation’:

(1.8) OBVIATION

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

An obviative pronoun is one that must obey obviation, and a proximate pronoun is one that does not necessarily obey obviation. In English, the distinction between obviative and proximate pronominals is simply the distinction between pronouns and anaphors. However, as (Kiparsky, 2002, p.5ff) shows, there are languages with obviative/proximate pronominals (Swedish) and languages with obviative/proximate reflexives (Algonquian), making this distinction cross-linguistically valid. The increasing specificity of the various binding domains along with their interaction with obviation is illustrated in (1.9), with example pronominals satisfying most of the types.

(1.9) Kiparsky’s pronominal typology



The blocking relationship between the pronominals comes from their increasing specificity, wherein pronouns with more specific binding domains block the use of pronouns with less specific binding domains. For instance, *himself* has a more specific binding domain than *he* in English, as can be seen in (1.9). Likewise, if English had something like the Icelandic *sig*, *himself* would block use of it in finite bound local domains.

Notably absent in (1.9) are two types of pronominals, obviative locally bound pronominals (presumably a theoretical impossibility since obviation is by definition non-local) and 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). We believe that *your ass* fills the latter gap in the typology.

## 4 *Your Ass* and the Pronominal Typology

Of interest in the present context is the fact that *your ass* can apparently be used in all of the binding domains in (1.7), as shown in (1.10)-(1.14).

(1.10) 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.

(1.11) 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) 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 (sic) worse than listening to Dennis $_i$  is listening to Bart and Freida. [alt.fan.don-n-mike, 06-16-2000]

(1.12) 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]

(1.13) 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.

(1.14) 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]

The fact that *your ass* can occur in contexts such as (1.14) shows that *your ass* is a proximate, and the fact that it can occur in contexts such as (1.10), with no linguistic antecedent, shows that it is referentially independent. Prima facie, these data appear to show that *your ass* is in fact a universal pronoun, i.e. a referentially independent proximate. This

type of pronominal, while theoretically possible, is otherwise unattested in Kiparsky's extensive survey, and proof of the existence of such a pronominal further validates this typology by filling in the final logically possible gap in the paradigm. However, *your ass* poses a serious problem for the theory in general since it seems to contradict the blocking principle, which incorrectly predicts that reflexives should block *your ass* in local binding domains (cf. (1.14)).

## 5 Semantics of *Your Ass* and Blocking

We argue, however, that examination of the meaning of *your ass* can account for its anomalous behavior. Specifically, it seems that *your ass* has two elements of meaning not found in other pronominals: (a) it can be used only in the proper social setting (acting as a marker of that setting), and (b) it carries additional semantics about relationships between participants and referents in the discourse.

### 5.1 On the social meaning of *your ass*

Although it may seem obvious, *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 reputable conference proceedings, etc. This same point is made by Spears (1998, p.236) who argues that the meaning of *your ass* is “social and abstract” and that it “marks a discourse as being in U[nensored] M[ode]”, i.e. in a social context where expressions that would be inappropriate elsewhere (i.e. censored contexts) are neutral with respect to appropriateness (Spears, 1998, p.232).<sup>4</sup> Thus, *your ass* marks a discourse as being in a particular mode/social setting in a way that standard pronominals do not. This fact alone shows that there are more differences between *your ass* and other pronominals than simply domain specificity.

### 5.2 On The Non-Social Meaning of *Your Ass*

Although the facts are subtle and we have not conducted a full exploration, even when one is in the proper social context, *your ass* and other English pronominals are not simply interchangeable. All of the examples we have seen so far would be qualitatively different if a standard English pronominal were used in place of *your ass*. The first way in which it is different is that *your ass* can mark negative connotations of the *ass*-marked referent:

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

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<sup>4</sup>Spears' discussion was specifically concerned with use of the *ass* morpheme in African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), whereas our discussion concerns uses of just *your ass* by a wider set of speakers, including our own non-AAVE judgments.

(b) I am gonna knock you down the hill.

In (1.15a), use of *your ass* conveys the message that the patient is somehow subordinate to the agent, i.e. the speaker makes it explicit that she believes the patient to be of no match for her. When a regular pronoun is substituted, as in (1.15b), the same effect is not achieved. This negative use of *your ass* seems to be the most common, characterizing most of the examples we have given above. For such uses, the evaluation scale tends to be a relative scale, wherein the *ass*-marked referent is typically conveyed to be lower on some power-based hierarchy relative to another participant in the dialogue.

In addition to negative connotations, however, *your ass* can also mark positive connotations for the *ass*-marked referent:

- (1.16) (a) brittney, you stupid....do you realy (sic) think my man mase is really (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...

In (1.16a), the writer uses *your ass* to convey a more positive message about his regard for the *ass*-marked participant, conveying envy or respect for Mase by referring to him with *your ass*. The parallel example in (1.16b) with a standard English pronoun is neutral regarding the writer's attitude towards Mase. These positive uses are rarer in the data we examined, and tend to involve generic scales: the *ass*-marked referent is typically conveyed in a generic positive light rather than relative to another discourse participant, unlike negative uses of *your ass*. 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.<sup>5</sup>

### 5.3 The Interaction of Semantics and Blocking

It is not our goal to present a formal account of how semantics is incorporated into blocking, but the basic idea is that strict specificity is not enough, since once semantics are taken into account, no strict specificity relationship holds between the reflexive and *your ass*: one has a more specific domain and the other a more specific meaning. Instead the interaction must involve preserving semantics even when domain specificity is violated. This could be implemented in the OT account of Kiparsky by assuming that *your ass* overtly encodes additional meaning over other pronominals, and that there is

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<sup>5</sup>Incidentally, these semantic facts also show that *your ass* cannot be the only pronominal form in the *ass*-register. Its unique meaning exists in contrast to alternative pronominals, and if these pronominals were not part of the register, then *your ass* could not contrast with them. Furthermore, *ass*-marked and non-*ass*-marked pronominals occur side-by-side in many of our naturally occurring examples (cf. (1.16a)).

a very highly ranked constraint, a sort of “semantic faithfulness” constraint, requiring this meaning to be overtly realized in the output if present in the input. With such a constraint, *himself* always loses on semantic grounds regardless of domain specificity since it never carries the more specific semantics. Presumably other approaches might accomplish the same thing, but the main point is that blocking must be sensitive to more than just binding domains and in a more complicated way than just specificity.

## 6 Non-Blocking Theories of Binding

Although our main focus is on blocking theories of binding, various alternatives may also have difficulties dealing with *your ass*. In particular, a class of theories such as those proposed in Chomsky (1981), Reinhart and Reuland (1993), Pollard and Sag (1994), which we will refer to as “partition” theories, have two parts. First, they assume a discrete partitioning of the space of pronominal types, and second, instead of blocking, they propose a (small) set of conditions that govern the distribution of different equivalence classes. *Your ass* potentially causes problems for partition theories since discrete partitioning is largely incompatible with its wide distribution. Taking as an example the extensive theory in Reinhart and Reuland (1993), they propose dividing the space of pronominals into four categories by two boolean features, R(eferential independence), roughly corresponding to whether something needs a linguistic antecedent, and Refl(exivizing function), corresponding to whether a pronominal requires a predicate to have coreference between coarguments. This yields the following typology:

(1.17)

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

The three attested types are labeled SELF, for referentially dependent reflexives like English *himself* and Dutch *zichzelf*, SE (“simplex expression”) for referentially dependent non-reflexives such as the Spanish *se* and Dutch *zich*, and referentially independent non-reflexives such as English *him*. The fourth type is a referentially independent reflexive, not discussed by Reinhart and Reuland (it’s not clear whether they consider it a logical possibility or not). They propose three conditions governing the distribution of these pronoun types, the exact nature of which is largely irrelevant for present purposes. The relevant factor is the partitioning, since the data in (1.10)-(1.14) clearly show that *your ass* occurs in any argument position, and therefore does not fall into any of the four pronominal classes.

While still maintaining the partition approach, there are two obvious solutions to this problem. The first would be to maintain the strict partition but assume additional, presumably semantic, conditions governing the

distribution of *your ass*. This would still require, however, stipulatively assigning *your ass* to one class or another of pronouns. Alternatively, one could assume a polysemy of *your ass*, with one lexical entry for each possible pronoun type, an undesirable and unwarranted stipulation. The second solution is to assume that *your ass* is an instance of a generic pronominal underspecified for R and Refl. Allowing underspecification, though, expands the space of possible pronouns from four to nine:

(1.18)

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

In this case, there are now several gaps in the paradigm. Depending on whether [R+,Refl+] pronouns are logically possible, there are now at least two and maybe five currently unattested pronominal types. The question of their existence is a largely empirical question, but relaxing the restrictions on partitioning makes strong predictions that may not be empirically validated.

Before concluding it is worth mentioning that there is a wealth of literature on various approaches to binding theory that we have not dealt with here. Much semantic work has dealt with anaphora (e.g. Reinhart (1983), *inter alia*, or Partee and Bach (1981) for a Montague-grammar style approach), and other strains have attempted to derive some (or all) binding facts from pragmatics (e.g. Levinson (1987), Huang (2000)). Semantic/Pragmatic approaches are often based on or quite compatible with other approaches to binding, and indeed our own account of *your ass* essentially assumes that semantics and pragmatics (contextual, social, and non-social meaning) are indeed relevant factors within a more syntactic account, although we have not addressed the details of accommodating *your ass* within these specific theories, since blocking has been our main concern.

## 7 Concluding remarks

Focusing primarily on the pronominal typology in Kiparsky (2002), we have shown first and foremost that *your ass* has pronominal uses, bringing new data to bear on binding theory. Secondly, *your ass* appears to fill in a hitherto unattested pronominal type, namely the most general category of “universal pronoun”. However, it poses a problem for any theory of blocking of pronominals based on binding domain specificity since *your ass* can appear in any binding domain, immune to blocking. We argue that *your ass* contributes additional meaning that no other pronominal contributes and, in some fashion or another, the necessity of expressing this meaning must be taken into account by the blocking theory. That is, the facts of *your ass* suggest that blocking based purely on specificity of binding domains is too limited, and factors such as meaning must be taken into account as well.

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