

The Proper Treatment of *Your Ass* in English

John Beavers & Andrew Koontz-Garboden
Stanford University
jbeavers@csl.stanford.edu, andrewkg@csl.stanford.edu
ESSLLI '03 Student Workshop

Aug 26th, 2003

1 Introduction

- In many colloquial dialects of English, there exists a pronominal expression of the form possessive pronoun+*ass*. We refer to this class of expressions collectively as *your ass*.
- The expression is not simply a possessive pronouns+NP (PossNP) construction; it is semantically non-compositional, since *your ass* can do things that *an ass* cannot do.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)
 - (c) 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)
- However, *your ass* appears in both reflexive and pronominal binding domains.
 - (2) (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, and argue that they're problematic for both types.

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.

- Blocking theories, which rely on the elsewhere principle (Burzio, 1999, Kiparsky, 2002). In particular, Kiparsky’s typology predicts a pronominal like *your ass*.
- Partition theories, partition the space of pronominals and impose constraints on their binding domains.
- We first show that *your ass* is indeed a pronoun, and not a PossNP. We then discuss the problems *your ass* causes for these binding theories and some solutions.

2 The pronominality of *your ass*

In this section we present evidence that *your ass* is indeed pronominal rather than a PossNP.

- There is no standard non-theory-internal definition for a pronoun. We show that *your ass* patterns more like complex reflexives than PossNPs by a variety of syntactic and semantic criteria.
- **Compositionality:** *your ass* (like reflexives) shares reference with its purported possessive determiner, unlike all other PossNPs:
 - (3) (a) John_i bought [his_i ear/mother/neck]_{j≠i} a car.
 - (b) John_i bought [himself/his_i ass]_i a car.
- In no other PossNP does a verb predicate of the possessor rather than the possessed (i.e. assign a θ -role to the pronoun in [Spec,DP] rather than the DP itself).
- **Binding:** *Your ass* has unique properties when serving as the antecedent of other pronouns:
 - (4) (a) John_i, his_i ass_i upset himself_i/*him_i.
 - (b) John_i, his_i grade/mother/broken back upset him_i/*himself_i.
- If *his ass* in (4a) were a PossNP then the purported possessive pronoun would be licensing the reflexive, something possessors in other PossNPs cannot do.
- **Modification:** In general, PossNPs allow for a wide range of modification by adjectives, PPs, and relative clauses as in (5a), whereas *your ass*, like pronominals, shows a more limited modifiability:
 - (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 from Houston/that stopped by three times last week.
 - (e) *The doctor saw his ass from Houston/that stopped by three times last week.
- **Ellipsis:** PossNPs can license \bar{N} -ellipsis whereas reflexives and *your ass* cannot (coindexation is intended to indicate “sense” coreference and not strict coreference):
 - (6) (a) Mary had her [car/house/office painted]_i, and Jane had hers e_i entirely remodeled.
 - (b) *Mary had herself_i/her ass_i committed, and Jane had hers e_i released.

- Each of the binding domains is cross-classified for the property of ‘obviation.’
- (9) OBVIATION
Coarguments have disjoint reference (Kiparsky, 2002, p.2)).
- An obviative 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.
 - 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.
 - Notably absent in (7) are two types of pronominals.
 - obviative 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).

4 *Your Ass* and the Pronominal Typology

- *Your ass* can be used in all of the binding domains in (8), suggesting that it is Kiparsky’s missing “universal pronoun.”
- (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.
- (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 worse than listening to Dennis $_i$ is listening to Bart and Freida. [alt.fan.don-n-mike, 06-16-2000]
- (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]
- (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.

(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]

- 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.

5 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

5.1 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.

5.2 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 to other participants):

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

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

Here the speaker seems to be ascribing a lower power status to the *ass*-marked referent than herself, something not conveyed by the regular pronoun.

- 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):

- (16) (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...

Here the speaker seems to be expressing her general admiration for the *ass*-marked referent (not necessarily in comparison with another participant), again something not conveyed by the regular pronoun.

- These examples are rarer in our data.

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.

5.3 The Interaction of Semantics and Blocking

This isn't a formal account of how the interaction of semantics and 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* overtly encodes additional meaning over other pronominals.
 - 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, since *your ass* encodes meaning that it fails to encode.

6 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.
- Instead of blocking, conditions are imposed on the distributions of 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 (the binding conditions are irrelevant to this discussion):

(17)

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

But the data in (10)-(14) 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 pronominal underspecified for R and Refl. However, allowing underspecification expands the space of possible pronouns from four to nine:

(18)

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

- At least two (or five) logical possibilities 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.

- A wealth of other types of binding theories exist as well, including more formal approaches (cf. Partee and Bach (1981), Reinhart (1983)) and pragmatic accounts (cf. Levinson (1987), Huang (2000)).
- Such approaches are often based on/compatible with other approaches to binding, and indeed our own account assumes that semantics/pragmatics (contextual, social, and non-social meaning) are relevant factors.

7 Concluding remarks

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

References

- Burzio, L. (1999). Anaphora and soft constraints. In J. Franco, A. Landa, and J. Martín (Eds.), *Grammatical Analyses in Basque and Romance Linguistics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Chomsky, N. (1981). *Lectures on Government and Binding*. Dordrecht: Foris.
- Faltz, L. M. (1985). *Reflexivization: A Study in Universal Syntax*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.
- Holm, J. (2000). *An Introduction to Pidgins and Creoles*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Huang, Y. (2000). *Anaphora: a cross-linguistic approach*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Kiparsky, P. (2002). Disjoint reference and the typology of pronouns. In I. Kaufmann and B. Stiebels (Eds.), *More Than Words*. Berlin: Academie Verlag.
- Kuhn, J. (2001). *Formal and computational aspects of optimality-theoretic syntax*. Ph. D. thesis, Universitat Stuttgart, Stuttgart.
- Levinson, S. C. (1987). Pragmatics and the grammar of anaphora: a partial pragmatic reduction of binding and control phenomena. *Journal of Linguistics* (23), 379–434.
- Partee, B. and E. Bach (1981). Quantification, pronouns, and VP anaphora. In J. Groenendijk, T. Janssen, and M. Stokhof (Eds.), *Formal Methods in the Study of Language*, pp. 445–481. Amsterdam: Mathematisch Centrum.
- Pollard, C. and I. A. Sag (1994). *Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago.
- Reinhart, T. (1983). *Anaphora and Semantic Interpretation*. London: Croom Helm.
- Reinhart, T. and E. Reuland (1993). Reflexivity. *Linguistic Inquiry* 28.
- Schladt, M. (2000). The typology and grammaticalization of reflexives. In Z. Frajzyngier and T. S. Curl (Eds.), *Reflexives: Forms and Functions*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Spears, A. (1998). African-American language use: ideology and so-called obscenity. In S. Mufwene, J. Rickford, G. Bailey, and J. Baugh (Eds.), *African-American English: Structure, History, and Use*. New York: Routledge.