

Expressive Capability Trumps Syntax: A Case Study in Colloquial English Pronominals

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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*.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. **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)
 - c. Nah, I don't think so....I got my baseball bat right by the bed so I can smash **its ass**[=a doll], Chucky-style. (=smash it) [<http://forums.yellowworld.org/archive/index.php/t-15055.html>]
- *Your ass* is not simply a possessive pronouns+NP (PossNP); it is semantically non-compositional. Furthermore, *your ass* appears in both reflexive and pronominal binding domains.
 - (2) a. **Direct object (reflexive):**
But most people do believe OJ_i bought his ass_i /himself $_i$ /*him $_i$ out of jailtime. [*soc.culture.china*, 01-28-02]
 - b. **Direct object (non-reflexive):**
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. **Subject (non-reflexive):**
his ass/he /*himself claimed that his old lady gave him the fuckin' bucks.... [*alt.music.yes*, 04-01-00]
- We discuss the problems *your ass* causes for various types of syntactic binding theories.
- We suggest that *your ass* has expressive content (Potts and Kawahara 2004) and the need to express this content trumps binding constraints.
- This extends the role semantics and pragmatics (in particular informativeness and coreference) play in binding theory (Partee and Bach 1981, Reinhart 1983, Levinson 1987, Huang 2000).

¹We use naturally occurring examples wherever possible. These were collected via searches with *Google* of news-groups and web text, and are listed with their original reference. We did not control for speaker background or dialect.

2 The Pronominality of *Your Ass*

- There is no standard non-theory-internal definition for a pronoun.
- We show that *your ass* patterns like reflexives but not PossNPs (qua R-expressions) by a variety of syntactic and semantic criteria.
- **Compositionality:** *your ass* (like reflexives) shares reference with its putative possessive determiner, unlike all other PossNPs:
 - (3) a. John_i bought [his_i mother]_{j≠i} an earring.
 - b. John_i bought [his_i ass]_i/himself_i an earring.
- **Binding:** *Your ass* generates Principle A rather than Principle B violations:
 - (4) a. His_i broken back upset him_i/*himself_i.
 - b. His ass_i upset himself_i/*him_i.
- One could argue that perhaps *your ass* is compositional, where *ass* is a lexeme that enforces identity between the possessive pronominal and the entire DP (i.e. *ass* is a relational noun whose semantics is the identity function).
- However, if this were the case, we would expect *your ass* to behave like any other PossNP and not to occur in reflexive contexts, though it clearly does (see (2)).
- We would also expect it to behave like PossNPs in other respects, which we show it does not.
- **Agreement:** Agreement is optional for plural *your ass*:
 - (5) a. Keep up the good work and copyright everything so you can sue their asses if they steal again [<http://www.testmy.net/topic-868>]
 - b. I certainly hope record companies begin to send viruses in their spoofed files, then I can sue their ass. [<http://www.overclockers.com/tips244/>]
- There are cases of collective nouns with variable agreement:
 - (6) a. The committee got itself into a bind.
 - b. The committee got themselves into a bind.
- The core case, however, is a grammatically singular noun with semantically plural referent triggering plural agreement.
- Overtly plural nouns triggering singular agreement as in (5b) is otherwise unattested to our knowledge (though singular *themselves* may be a telling exception).
- **Modification:** PossNPs can be modified; *your ass*, like reflexives, shows limited modifiability:
 - (7) a. I borrowed your red jacket from Macy's that Sandy bought for you.
 - b. Get your bad/ugly ass outta here. (cf. your bad/ugly self).

c. *The doctor_i saw himself_i from Houston/who stopped by last week.

d. *The doctor_i saw his ass_{i,j} from Houston/who stopped by 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):

(8) a. Mary had her office_i repainted, and Jane had hers e_i entirely remodeled.

b. *Mary had her ass_i committed, and Jane had hers e_i released.

- Given the evidence presented here, it is clear that *your ass* is a pronominal, not a regular PossNP.

- But is it just a regular pronominal?

- **Epithet:** *Your ass* is not an epithet (Lasnik 1976), since it need not be a bound variable:

(9) a. Mary told every senator_i that [the son of a bitch]_i was a crook.

b. Mary told every senator_i that his ass_i was a crook.

c. *Mary told Bush_i that [the son of a bitch]_i was a crook.

d. Mary told Bush_i that his ass_i was a crook.

- **Exempt Anaphor:** Is it perhaps an exempt anaphor, i.e. a reflexive that has pragmatic/logophoric control (Pollard and Sag 1992, 1994, Reinhart and Reuland 1993)?

(10) John_i was going to get even with Mary. That picture of himself_i in the paper would really annoy her, as would the other stunts he had planned.

- Typically exempt anaphors are complements of *picture* nouns or predicative preposition.

- Non-reflexive *your ass* occurs everywhere, even in the most core reflexive contexts (as in (2)).

- Thus *your ass* is also not like other pronominals. It appears to be a unique class.

- Note that there *are* full possessive DP+*ass* expressions as well:

(11) I believe you owe John’s ass an apology. [<http://wizbangblog.com/2006/10/20/democratic-staffer-suspended-for-intel-leak.php>]

- This suggests some degree of compositionality with the *ass* morpheme, though we see the same for reflexive *self* (though usually with a modifier):

(12) If you can get through such cringe-inducing passages about Deutsch’s bad self, however, a patient reader can learn a few things about building a successful advertising firm. [<http://www.populationstatistic.com/archives/2005/12/20/>]

- However, these do not have the distribution of *your ass*, since they have the binding properties of R-expressions and show more regular agreement.

- (13) a. *He_i got Michael's bad ass_i tossed out of the show. (*Reflexive)
 b. The workers' asses/*ass held a ten-week strike. (Obligatory agreement)

- However, they do have some properties in common with *your ass*.

- (14) a. Michael's bad/cold/ugly ass did the moonwalk. (Adjective modifiers)
 b. *Michael's ass from the Bronx arrived yesterday. (*Other modifiers)
 c. *Michael's ass but not John's was arrested. (*N̄-ellipsis)

- This suggests that they are also not regular PossNPs, either.
- The similarity of *your ass* and PossNPs is not surprising; complex pronominals are often grammaticalized PossNPs formed from a possessive pronoun+body part (Faltz 1985, Schladt 2000).
- Interestingly, the word for “buttocks” in several creole languages also has reflexive uses, if not pronoun uses (Holm 2000:226; though he notes only a reflexive uses).
- It might be best to view *your ass* as being on a cline of pronominal grammaticalization, patterning closer to pronouns than PossNPs.

3 Analyzing *Your Ass* - Kiparsky's Pronominal Typology

- We give special attention to the pronoun typology of Kiparsky (2002) since it seems to predict the existence of *your ass*, though *your ass* requires modification of Kiparsky's approach.
- Kiparsky (2002:200ff) proposes a hierarchy of binding domains based on four increasingly specific criteria (see tree in (17)), with blocking governing the interaction among them.

- (15) a. **Referentially Independent:** Need not have an overt antecedent.
 Tell me about —_i, —_j, and —_k. [pointing]
- b. **Referentially Dependent:** Must have an overt antecedent (in prior discourse).
- i. **Non-Reflexive:** Antecedent need not be in same sentence.
 John_i is here. I saw —_i.
- ii. **Reflexive:** Antecedent must be in same sentence.
- A. **Non-Finite-Bound:** Antecedent need not be in same finite clause.
 John_i thought that I would criticize —_i.
- B. **Finite-Bound:** Antecedent need not be in same finite clause.
1. **Non-Local:** Antecedent need not be in governing category.
 John_i asked me to criticize —_i.
2. **Local:** Antecedent must be in governing category.
 John_i criticized —_i. (Kiparsky 2002:201)

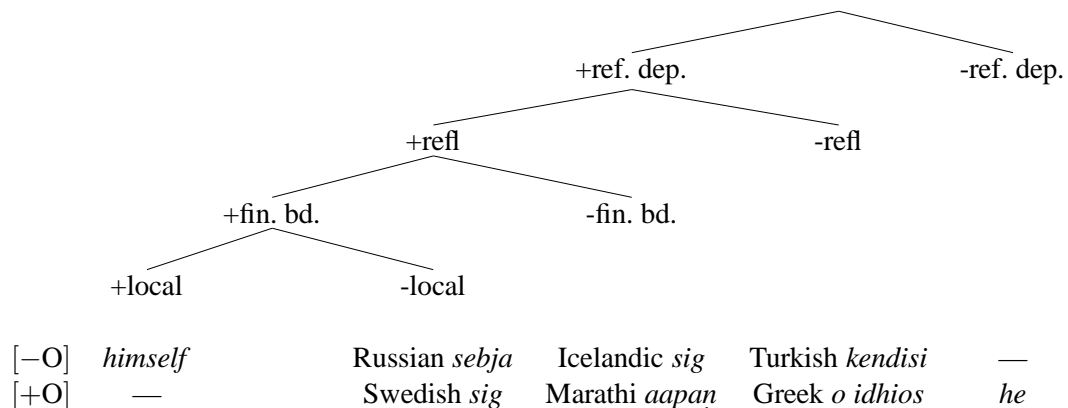
- Each of the binding domains is cross-classified for the property of ‘obviation.’

(16) OBVIATION: Coarguments have disjoint reference (Kiparsky 2002:187).

- Obviative pronoun - must obey obviation (*him*)
- Proximate pronoun - need not obey obviation (*himself*)

- Putting the pieces together, we get the following:

(17) Kiparsky’s pronominal typology:



- **Blocking** determines distribution: pronominals with more specific binding domains block the use of pronominals with less specific binding domains (see also Burzio 1999).

- Notably absent in (17) are two types of pronominals.

- **Obviative locally bound pronominals** - These are presumably a theoretical impossibility since obviation is by definition non-local.
- **Proximate referentially independent pronominals** - a pronoun that, effectively is compatible with any domain and is thus a sort of “universal pronoun” (Kiparsky 2002:202).

- We argue that *your ass* is the universal pronoun.

4 A Universal Pronoun in English?

- *Your ass* can be used in all of the binding domains in (15):

(18) Referential independence

- On the agenda for today is to talk about his ass_i , his ass_j , and her ass_k . [pointing]
- I mean her ass, over there.

(19) Referentially dependent, non-reflexive

- 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]
- (20) 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]
- (21) 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.
- (22) Local
- a. And don't expect people to be nice to newbies either. You're treading on their turf, you better know how to behave your ass. [alt.rave, 03-03-95]
 - 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 and pronouns in obviative domains.

5 Semantics of *Your Ass*

- *Your ass* has two additional semantics components that may explains this:
 - *Your ass* can be used only in the proper social setting (acting as a marker of that setting).
 - *Your ass* carries expressive content about 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 deemed inappropriate, e.g. in an invited talk at a prestigious private university, or in a reputable academic journal (cf. Beavers and Koontz-Garboden 2006).
- Spears (1998:236) 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 1998:232).
- 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 Expressive 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, something not conveyed by the regular pronoun:
 - (23) a. I am gonna knock your ass down the hill. [rec.climbing, 08-18-01]
 - b. I am gonna knock you down the hill.
- The speaker seems to be ascribing a lower power status to the *ass*-marked referent than herself.
- 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 (nearly all of the examples in (18)-(22)).
- *Your ass* can also mark positive connotations for the *ass*-marked referent:
 - (24) 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 expresses general admiration for the *ass*-marked referent, again something not conveyed by the regular pronoun.
- This type of meaning does not arise by entailment. It persists under negation:
 - (25) I'm not gonna knock your ass down the hill. (Still has evaluative meaning)
- It is not presuppositional, either, and can survive a presupposition “plug” (Karttunen 1973):
 - (26) a. Mary said that John stopped smoking. (No presupposition)
 - b. Mary said that I'm gonna knock your ass down the hill. (Has evaluative meaning)
- It is perhaps expressive content (Potts and Kawahara 2004 in discussion of Japanese honorifics).
 - It introduces a separate (performative) speech act and preserves primary the speech act.
 - It expresses evaluation of relations between entities, constraining context.
 - It is not easily paraphrasable.
- This is also different from the pragmatic factors sometimes thought to be relevant for anaphora (Partee and Bach 1981, Reinhart 1983, Levinson 1987, Huang 2000).
 - Levinson derives (some) binding facts from Gricean maxims of Quantity: all else being equal prefer disjoint reference for full DPs and co-reference with pronouns/zero anaphora.
- This expressive content is unique from informativity of reference.
- A better understanding of the semantics of *your ass* will require much more examination of naturally occurring data.
- It should be clear that *your ass* carries meaning that other English pronominals don't, and a kind of meaning not normally thought to be relevant for binding theory.

6 The Proper Treatment of *Your Ass* in English

- We don't offer here a formal account of the role of this, but the basic idea is:
- Blocking can't apply straightforwardly because there are too many points of variation:
 - Other pronouns have a more specific binding domain.
 - *Your ass* has a more specific meaning/social context of use.
- In other words, *your ass* and other pronominals are technically in free variation, save that each has its own constraints on distribution (binding domains and/or expressive/social meaning).
- Reflexives and pronouns are governed by blocking.
- However, this just makes room for the relevant content. What the meaning is and how it came to interact with binding theory is a much bigger question.
- Note that the inherent contrastiveness eliminates an alternative, register-based analysis.
- One could say that regular pronominals and *your ass* exist in different registers and thus do not participate in blocking relations.
- But *your ass* relies on contrastiveness, suggesting both exist in both registers (just as contrasts in prolix and marking of coreference underlie pragmatic accounts; cf. Levinson 1987).
- Furthermore, *your ass* and other pronominals occur side-by-side in many of our naturally occurring examples, as in (24a).

7 Other Theories of Binding

- More traditional generative binding theories (Chomsky 1981, 1982, Pollard and Sag 1992, 1994, Reinhart and Reuland 1993) assume a discrete partitioning of the space of pronominals.
- Conditions are imposed on the distributions of different equivalence classes.
- *Your ass* is also problematic for these theories. Consider ye olde standard (Chomsky 1981, 1982) with two features, pro(noun) and ana(phor), yielding four types:

(27) Pronominal types (overt):

	[+pro]	[-pro]
[+ana]	∅	reflexive
[-ana]	pronoun	R-expression

- (28)
- Principle A: A [+ana] element must be bound in its governing category.
 - Principle B: A [+pro] element must be free in its governing category.
 - Principle C: A [-pro,-ana] element must be free everywhere.

- But the data in (18)-(22) shows that *your ass* may occur in any position.
- Solution #1:
 - Assume *your ass* is underspecified for pro and ana. However, allowing underspecification expands the space of possible pronouns from four to nine:

(29)

	[+pro]	[-pro]	[+/-pro]
[+ana]	∅	reflexive	∅
[-ana]	pronoun	R-expression	??
[+/-ana]	∅	??	<i>your ass</i>

- At least two logical possibilities are currently (as far as we know) unattested.
- Therefore the empirical data doesn't support underspecification.
- It would be worse with more features, e.g. [+/-overt] (Chomsky 1982:78ff) predicts covert *your ass* (CYA) as well as covert versions of other predicted categories.
- Solution #2:
 - Assume semantic exemption of some sort, as outlined above.
 - This would require either (a) adding yet another feature or (b) assigning *your ass* to one class or another of pronouns and exempting it by other means, which, given its distribution, is likely to be stipulative or create polysemy.

8 Concluding remarks

- First and foremost, *your ass* is a universal pronoun, but violates all of your favorite syntactic binding principles (however formulated, cf. blocking or GB-style binding principles).
- When semantics is taken into account the distribution is better explained.
- What is interesting here is that semantics can have such a categorical effect on otherwise categorical syntactic binding constraints. This goes beyond “exempt anaphors”.
- The other interesting thing is the type of semantics; this is not based informativity of (co)reference (as in Levinson 1987), but instead expressive content and social setting/environment.
- But why should either of these have anything to do with binding theory, and why so dramatically?
- I'm stumped.

“‘Curiouser and curiouser!’ cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English).”

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