

# English Pronouns and Evolution of the English Pronominal System

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**Abstract:** A regular system of pronouns was not fully developed until the late period of Early Modern English. The English language is classified into two linguistic groups: synthetic and analytic. The evolution of English pronouns from previous times to the present is explored to gain a better understanding of change in this lexical paradigm. Many academics suggest that English, like many other languages, has a less well-established history as an instrument of male patriarchal oppression. Nowadays, it raises the question of whether the English pronominal system is ever stable because people who identify as neither male nor female use non-binary/epicene pronouns.

**Keywords:** English pronouns, Prominal system, Early Modern English

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, English has become the universal language that is prominent in all aspects of society such as economic, scientific, and political circles. Due to its vital role, the number of English speakers has experienced a post-haste increase over the last several decades. Apart from the English language as a first language, the pidginization and creolization of English are various throughout the world (James, 1980, p. 9; Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 6) due to historical circumstances, borrowings, and evolution. A standard system of pronouns had not been wholly constructed until the end of the Early Modern English stage (Busse, 2001, p. 120, as cited in Paterson, 2011). The paper's aim is to consider the definitions in terms of English pronouns and their pronominal system development.

## 2. ENGLISH PRONOUNS

### 2.1. Some Notions of English Pronouns

The term of "English pronominal system" has attracted a wide range of linguistic pundits. Elbourne (2011) define the English asset as various words used to refer to human and inanimate referents, repleting "names, pronouns, and demonstratives (this and that)" (p. 111). For example, "he" is a personal pronoun to indicate a male individual; on the contrary, "she" can play as a subject not only to replace a woman but also represent the personification of a ship, country, or car.

Pronouns may take the place of nouns and may be assumed as subject and object in a structural clause or sentence. In a narrower denotation for first language learners, Wise (2002) simplifies "a pronoun is a word that occupies the slots of a preceding noun which names people, locations, objects, or conceptions" to avoid repeating the similar word "too frequent" (p. 135). Grammatically, Pinnock (2007) points out that every pronoun has its antecedent noun for which it replaces, and they must gain agreement in gender and number, as in the example: "Vietnam is improving tourism promotion through movies; as a result, she has attracted many overseas filmmakers and directors to come." In this illustration, 'she' refers back to "Vietnam" - a country that deictically regulated a female peculiarity.

### 2.2. Common Categories of Present English Pronouns

Donnelly (1994) and Pinnock (2007) also elaborate on several crucial categories of pronouns, such as personal pronouns (e.g., I, we, he, she, it, they, and you); relative pronouns (e.g., who, whom, whose, which, that, and what); interrogative pronouns (e.g., what, which, who, and whose); and demonstrative pronouns (e.g., this, that, these, and those).

In another notation by Sullivan (2014), the pronoun-elect has inheritably encompassed two types of personal and demonstrative pronouns discussed above. Besides, the “aristogenic” others are reflexive pronouns (e.g., myself, ourselves, yourself/ yourselves, himself, herself, itself and themselves) used for emphasis, and indefinite pronouns (e.g., most, and both) function as a subject.

### 3. THE EVOLUTION OF THE ENGLISH PRONOMINAL SYSTEM

#### 3.1. The Development of the English Generic Pronouns

For the purposes of this section, the systematic evolution of the English pronouns is examined from earlier eras to the present for the understanding of change in this lexical paradigm. According to Baugh and Cable (2002), English derived from the Low West Germanic branch of the Indo-European family of languages, nouns and pronouns have inflectional forms of endings. The English language is divided into “synthetic” (Old English) and “analytic” (Modern English) (p. 50). A synthetic language concerns the inflections of linguistic lexical units in a sentence, whereas an analytic one focuses on word order and fundamental grammar points, including prepositions and auxiliary verbs in correlation with the meaning. Historically, many scholars argue that English, like many other languages, has been less and more established as a tool of male patriarchal oppression; therefore, the masculine pronoun “he” defaults to people in general (Einwohner et al., 2017). At the end of the Early Modern English, the replacement of the pronoun “thou” with “you” is a significant shift (Busse 2001, p. 120).

The grammatical gender distinctions in several other languages, like French and German, which require the agreement of appropriate pronouns, are absent from Modern English, in which gender is determined by meaning (Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 12). Curzan (2003) states that the gender grammatical agreement of the linguistic constituents has disappeared in modern languages, but only personal pronouns remain semantically gendered (p.14).

The definite articles ‘*sē, sēo, ðæt*’ meaning ‘*the, that*’ in Old English are “demonstrative” pronouns in the Modern English, along with relative pronouns and personal pronouns. Old English possesses the different forms of personal pronouns distinguished by “gender” (i.e., feminine, masculine, and neuter/epicene), “persons,” “cases,” and forms for “singular, plural, and dual number” (Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 53).

#### 3.2. The Evolution of English Personal Pronoun Cases and Forms

Jebson (2001) proposes that four major cases of personal pronouns consist of nominative, genitive/possessive, dative, and accusative. The pronouns are classified into four paradigms with examples in Old English, Early Modern English, or Modern English presented in table 1.

Concerning the most resemble relevant, Modern English shares much lexicons with Scandinavian such as the personal pronouns “*they, their, and them*” from Danish conquest in the Middle English period while in Old English, they are “*hīe, hiera, him*” (Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 92). In the masterpieces of William Shakespeare in the Early Modern English period, the same hold of “*you*” is manifested by “*thou, ye, thee, thine, and thyself*” (Sullivan, 2014).

**Table1.** The paradigms of English pronouns based on Jebson’s (2001) proposition

Case	Nominative/ Subjective		Genitive/ Possessive		Dative/ Indirect Object		Accusative/ Direct Objective	
	Old English	(Early) Modern English	Old English	(Early) Modern English	Old English	(Early) Modern English	Old English	(Early) Modern English
1 <sup>st</sup> person singular	Ic	I	mīn	my (mine)	mē	me	mē, mec	me
1 <sup>st</sup> person plural	wē	we	ūre	our	ūs	us	ūs	us
1 <sup>st</sup> person dual	wit	we two	uncer	our	unc	us	unc	us

2 <sup>nd</sup> person singular	þū	you (thou)	þīn	your (thine)	þē	you (thee)	þē, þeċ	you (thee)
2 <sup>nd</sup> person plural	ġe	you	ēower	your	ēow	you	ēow	you
2 <sup>nd</sup> person dual	ġit	you two	incer	your	inc	you	inc	you
3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular	hē hēo/hīo hit	he she it	his hire his	his her its	him hire him	him her it	Hīne hīe, hī him	him her it
3 <sup>rd</sup> person plural	hīe, hī	they	hira, hiera, heora, hiora	their	him, heom	them	hīe, hī	them

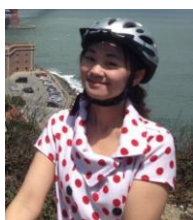
#### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the language reforms have diachronically influenced the changes in the English pronominal system. Throughout history, several pronominal paradigms like the pronominal inflections of dual number and neuter in Old English have vanished in accordance with some alternatives in Modern English from Middle and Early Modern English. It may raise the question of whether the English pronominal system keeps changing. In fact, it is a controversy that in neo-modern society, a part of a person’s identity is neither male nor female. Therefore, the pronominal system would be promised to generate or borrow more non-binary/epicene pronouns for the English dictionary.

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