# The reduction of sentence-initial subject pronouns : Standard Canadian English

Heather Newell & Camille Puel

Université du Québec à Montréal
newell.heather@uqam.ca, puel.camille@courrier.uqam.ca

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# Outline

- The phonology and syntax of (English) pronoun reduction
- Our database : specifically Nominative pronouns
- Accounting for the syntax-phonology interaction in pronoun reduction in English
  - Is it driven by syntax? Yes.
  - Is it driven by phonology? Yes , but the phonology need not do anything special re. its treatment of pronouns.
- A discussion of alternative explanations for the occurrence and placement of weak pronounse (e.g., 'allomorphy', 'Strong Start')
- Conclusions

# What pronouns can tell us about the syntax-phonology interface

## Take-Home Messages

- Strong and Weak pronouns are syntactically distinct.
- The different pronunciations of strong and weak pronouns are derivable from a combination of:
  - Their syntactic distinctions
  - Their underlying representations
  - The regular phonology
- Weak pronouns may emerge in any position where they are permitted syntactically.
  - Pronouns to not move for phonological reasons.
  - Many pronouns proposed to be derived via allomorphy are in fact derived via the regular phonology.

# The cross-linguistic properties of weak pronouns

## Weak pronouns: Stressing that it's not just stress

(1) English ACC pronouns

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| a. | I like **her** | [həɹ] |
| b. | I like'**r** | [ɹ̩] |

(2) English NOM pronouns

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| a. | **He** likes you | [híj] |
| b. | **He** likes ya | [ə/ɪ/ij] |

(3) Hebrew possessive pronouns

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| a. | **Shelahem** | [ʃelaém] |
| b. | Hasefer **shelahem** | [ʃlaem] |
| | 'Their book' | |

(4) Haitian Creole pronouns

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| a. | Jean remet **moi** liv la | [mwɛ̃́] |
| b. | Jean we**m** | [m] |
| | 'Jean saw me' | |

(5) BCS pronouns

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| a. | **Njima** je ovdje dosadno | [njíma] |
| | 'They are bored here' | |
| b. | Mnogo **im** je pomogao | [im] |
| | 'He helped them a lot' | |

(modified from Newell & Scheer (ms.))

# Nominative reductions

## The full forms and the possible reductions

| | I | We | You | She | He | They | It |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Full forms | [aj] | [wij] | [juw] | [ʃij] | [hij] | [ðɛj] | [ɪt] |
| Reduced forms | [ʌ/ə] | [wɪ/wə] | [jʌ/jə] | [ʃɪ/ʃə] | [ij/ɪ/ə] | [ðɛ/ðə] | [ət̄/eʔ] |

## What we will and will not deal with:

- We will discuss when, why, and how the pronouns are reduced.
- We will not discuss the different levels of vocalic reductions
  (These patterns are not particular to pronoun reduction)

# The database

## Nominative pronouns : a database of Standard Canadian English

- Semi-formal interviews from prominent Canadian news sources (e.g. Radio Canada, the CBC)
- Nominative reduction is not the norm, but is consistently found.
  - It is presumed that in non-intervew/less formal situations, the number of reductions will be increased

Demographics

| | 50- | 50+ |
|---|---|---|
| F (17 total) | 11 | 6 |
| M (17 total) | 6 | 11 |

## Number of examples collected for each pronoun

| Pronoun | # of ex. | Gender division |
|---|---|---|
| I | 29 | M: 17<br>F: 12 |
| We | 12 | M: 8<br>F: 4 |
| You | 23 | M: 16<br>F: 7 |
| He | 7 | M: 4<br>F: 3 |
| She | 5 | M: 1<br>F: 4 |
| It | 15 | M: 4<br>F: 11 |
| They | 12 | M: 3<br>F: 9 |

# Examples from the database

## Nominative Pronoun reductions

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| I | "...I [ʌ/ə] was thinking what do I do next..." | (Chris Hadfield, Ted Talk) |
| You | "...you [jə] you [jə] say Bridger, I've got a pal Daniel Bridger..." | (Jared Keeso from Letterkenney, on Q, CBC) |
| He | "... he says he [ij] decided to save a year of his life..." | (Amanda Putz of Bandwidth, CBC) |
| She | "...pretended that she [ʃə] worked at the Louvre..." | (Amanda Putz of Bandwidth, CBC) |
| It | "...but this time it [ɪʔ] was reporting on accounts..." | (Riley Yesno, Ted Talk) |
| We | "...we [wɪ] sort of keep it like a Niel Young..." | (Cole Fournier on Bandwidth, CBC) |
| They | "...they [ðɛ] would have a pyramid, and they [ðɛ] wouldn't..." | (Margaret Atwood on Brief But Spectacular) |

# The segmental alternations are key

## Alternations lead to underspecification

- Much work has been done on the fact that weak pronouns (and function words) are unstressed (Inkelas & Zec 1990; Selkirk 2014[1996], 2011; Truckenbrodt 2007; Ito & Mester 2018; Tyler 2019), but none adequately account for the segmental alternations seen.
- Newell & Scheer (ms.) note that (6-a) and (6-b) must be related.

(6) **Specific function word phonology**

a. Weak versions of function words are unstressed, while strong versions receive stress just like any regular lexical word.

b. Reduction: weak versions of function words are smaller than strong versions:
   - They contain fewer segments.
   - Their segmental content is a proper subset of the segments of the strong version.

## How are (6-a) and (6-b) related?

Underspecification : Alternating forms may be lexicalized as underspecified when the alternation:

- arises in predictable environments
- is specific to certain properties of lexical items (e.g., vowel harmony systems where affix Vs are underspecified for certain features, or liaison Cs in French that are underspecified for syllable structure.)

# Underspecification = less structure

## Underspecification = less syllabic space than required and missing links

| I | | We | | You | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| C | V | C | V | C | V |
| a | i | w | i | j | u |

| He | | She | | It | | | They | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| C | V | C | V | | C | V | C | V |
| | | | | | \| | | | |
| h | i | ʃ | i | ɪ | t | | ð | e |

Table 1 : The underlying representations of Nominative Pronouns

(Newell & Scheer ms.)

# Starting SOFT: How do we derive strength?

## What do we need to account for when accounting for pronoun reduction and strength, esp. for sentence-initial nominative pronouns?

- Given the proposal that the pronouns are underlyingly weak.
  - What determines the conditions under which NOM pronouns are weak or strong?
  - Is there anything special about left edges, and sentence-initial position in particular?

## Strength comes from extra structure

- Extra structure = more syntax (phases)
- Extra structure = more phonology (syllabic space)

# Stress = more space

## Many accounts of stress propose that it adds syllabic space.

(7) a. ['faato] 'fate'
b. ['fatto] 'done' (Vowel lengthening under stress: Chierchia (1982); Larsen (1998)

## Stress = more space, and places to link, even for consonants.

[h] in English is a geminate (as are [ASP] Cs) (Ségéral & Scheer 2008).

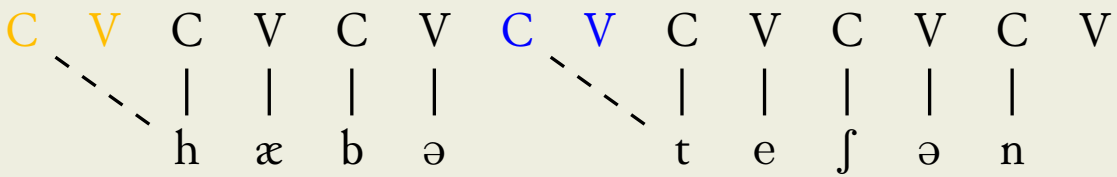
(8) ['vijəkl̩]


(9) [və'hɪkjələɹ]

# Underspecification = less space
# Left Edge of a phase = more space

## And the left edge of a phase also provides syllabic space (Scheer 2012)

(10) [hæbəˈtʰeʃən]




- The same effect = the same cause
  - Prosodic domains do not *predict* strength, and do not capture parallel strength at edges and internal positions.
- Note that the [h] is pronounced word initially even though it is not stressed. Compare the pattern of aspirated Cs in English.

# Which pronominal DPs are phases?

## Strong vs Weak pronouns

- Phasal D*P
  - Independent reference
  - Licit in co-ordination (*her and him*)
  - Modifiable (*only you*)
- Non-phasal DP
  - Anaphoric
  - Illicit in co-ordination (**'r 'n 'm*)
  - Not modifiable (* only'r)

(Cardinaletti 1994; Cardinaletti & Starke 1999; Déchaine & Wiltschko 2002)

## High vs Low register

- Register adds syntactic structure to the left periphery of a phrase (Haegeman 2013).
  - This register effect can be seen in the nominal domain : anaphoric, otherwise syntactically weak pronouns, may be fully pronounced.
  - This register effet can also be seen in the phrasal domain (CP vs C*P) : c.f. Haegeman's omission of subject pronouns in Diary English (e.g., Went to the store yesterday, ran into Glyne...)

# Stress, Phases, and the NOM pronouns

## A non-phase-initial pronoun

(11) Spell out of DP [ɪ/ij]

a. UR

| C | V |
|---|---|
| h | i |

b. linking of segments

| C | V |
|---|---|
| h | i |

Note that the non-phasal pronoun is too small to trigger the stress algorithm. The English stress algorithm is agreed to be triggered in the presence of a foot / two moras / CVCV, depending on one's theoretical toolbox.

## Notes on the output form : Regular English phonology

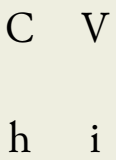
- [h] is only realized if it is a geminate. Short [h] = ∅
- /i/ = [ɪ] when linked to a single V slot. The pronunciation [ij] is due to spreading of /i/ to the syllable structure of a following word/a following C position.
- [ɪ] may reduce further to [ə]

# Stress, Phases, and the NOM pronouns

## A phase-initial pronoun

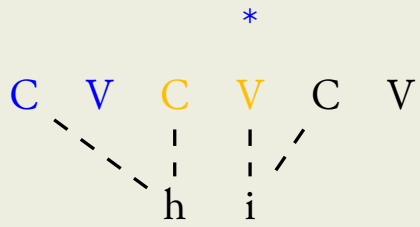
(12) Spell out of D*P [hij]: insertion of the phasal CV and the stress CV

a. UR




b. insert phasal CV, linking of segments


c. insert stress, stress CV, linking of segments




## The phasal CV may be inserted in 3 sentence-initial environments:

The D*P = strong phasal (a), the D*P = phasal due to high register (b), or the C*P = phasal due to high register (c). This entails that sentence-initial position will undergo less frequent reduction than interior positions.

(13) a. [*CP* [D*P He (and only he) ] can rock those heels ]
b. [*CP* [D*P He ] might do well to have the corgis groomed ]
c. [C*P [*DP* He ] might do well to have the corgis groomed ]

# What if it's not phases and stress?

## Alternate analyses

- What if it's allomorphy?
  - It has been proposed that function word alternations are due either to:
    - Allomorphy (e.g., Kaisse (1983))
      pronoun ⇔ weak (e.g., /ij/) / environment X
      pronoun ⇔ strong (e.g., /hij/) / elsewhere
    - Allomorphy / subcategorization frames (e.g., Tyler (2019))
      pronoun ⇔ weak (e.g., [/hij/ $\omega$ [ ]]/) / environment X
      pronoun ⇔ strong (e.g., /hij/) / elsewhere
- Strong Start?
  - It has been proposed that just being at a left edge:
    - Disfavours weak phonological items
      $*_{\phi}[\ \sigma$
    - Can trigger reordering of weak items
      $*_{\phi}[\ \sigma\ ]$ « FAITH (e.g., Selkirk (2011); Bennett et al. (2015))

# But, it *is* phases and stress

## Problems with allomorphy

- Recall the cross-linguistic patterns in (1)-(5).
  - The set~subset relation between strong-weak pairs points to phonology.
- The argument that the alternations are not 'regular phonology' does not take into account the effects of underspecification.

## Problems with SubCat frames

- They do not even try to account for the segmental alternations.
- They have issues with directionality of 'leaning'

## Problems with not parsing function words and Strong Start

- Are pronouns ignored by prosodic domain building algorithms? ((Selkirk 2014[1996])) No.
- Also does not try to account for the segmental alternations.
- Weak position optimization? Why should $\sigma$s skip $\omega$s to attach to $\phi$ edges?
  - The Irish and BCS data cited by Selkirk (2011) is explained if the placement of the pronouns is due to phrasal movement operations, and not otherwise. (Talić 2018; Thoms 2021)

# Conclusions

## Pronoun reduction occurs:

- In all pronominal positions in English, including the Nominative.
  - See Newell & Scheer (ms.) for a full treatment.
- Only when a pronoun is syntactically weak, no matter its linear position in the sentence.
- In the 'standard' dialect; it is not relegated to any particular dialect.

## Pronoun reduction is due to:

- Underlyingly underspecified lexical representations.
  - They are not 'ignored' by the phonology at any point. Their lack of stress is predictable from their size.
  - They are not 'overspecified' as 'function words' or with 'subcategorization frames'.
- Cyclic spell-out.
  - Phases may have phonological reflexes.
  - But, these reflexes make predictions consistent with their being syllabic (not higher prosodic structure).

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