THE REDUCTION OF SENTENCE-INITIAL SUBJECT PRONOUNS: STANDARD CANADIAN ENGLISH *

Heather Newell and Camille Puel
Université du Québec à Montréal

1. Introduction

Standard Canadian English (SCE) nominative pronouns undergo reduction in sentence-initial position. In this article we document and describe the empirical patterns of nominative pronoun reduction observed in natural speech (§2). In §3 we then briefly demonstrate how these patterns are accounted for at the syntax-phonology interface within the framework put forth by (Newell and Scheer ms. 2025).

Sentence-initial pronoun reduction in SCE calls into question the nature of proposed phonological constraints like Strong Start (Selkirk 2011). This constraint is proposed to be responsible for the movement of weak pronouns away from the left edge of a prosodic constituent (e.g. Bennett et al. (2015) for Modern Irish (MI) object pronouns, or Werle (2009) for BCS second position subject pronouns). However, consider the possible prosodic domain structures of *we think* in (1).

(1) a. [[wɪ [ˈθɪŋk]$_{\omega}$]$_{\omega}$ ...]$_{\phi}$
b. [[ˈwij]$_{\omega}$ [ˈθɪŋk]$_{\omega}$ ...]$_{\phi}$

A real-life example of the reduced form in (1a) is found in the following interview :

(2) “We [wɪ] think it’s time for a policy...”
Dominic Cardy | Power & Politics (CBC): Aug 14, 2024 (55sec)

The structure in (1a) represents the prosodic structure of the reduced pronoun+verb within the theory of prosodic phonology (see §3 for an alternate structural proposal). Reduced pronouns in English behave like clitics, never affecting the position of main stress. The full pronunciation in (1b) is a licit alternative to any reduced form of *we* and is used by the speaker in (2) in the majority of cases in the parts of the cited interview that we listened to. It is clear that neither focus stress nor discourse reference are the source of this variation. It is most likely that this variation is due to competition between registers, where the non-reduction of the pronoun is conditioned by the formal interview setting, but the reduced form is emerging as it is conditioned by the speakers more frequently used informal register (see §3 for further discussion).

*The authors would like to thank Lisa Travis’ skepticism about nominative pronoun reduction for inspiring this project. Funding was provided by SSHRC (430-2023-00814) *Pronouncing Pronouns : What pronominal variation tells us about the Human Language Faculty*.

Actes du congrès annuel de l’Association canadienne de linguistique 2025.
Proceedings of the 2025 annual conference of the Canadian Linguistic Association.

It is of note that the structure in (1a) involves a weak first member of the nested Prosodic word (ω). The reduced pronoun in SCE is sentence-initial and therefore must be an initial weak element in some domain, yet it does not undergo second-position movement, as in BCS, or post-posing, as in MI. Interestingly, in MI object post-posing is optional as STRONG START may also go unviolated if the reduced pronoun cliticizes to a ω to its left. In SCE, where pronoun postposing and second position movement are unavailable, and where there is no item to the left on which weak pronouns can lean, the only option that would permit STRONG START to remain unviolated would be to promote sentence-initial weak pronouns to full pronouns, as in (1b). Within Optimality Theory, the Emergence of the Unmarked would predict the available full-form to be the only attested output. That this is not the case calls into question the role of both prosodic optimality and allomorphy in phonological computation.[1] Documentation of weak subject pronouns in SCE is a first step in the analysis of this type of 'Weak Start' pattern, also seen in other languages such as Quebec French (e.g., *Il est.* 'He/It is.' [ɪlɛ]/[jɛ]).

2. The reduction of Nominative pronouns in Standard Canadian English

The reduction of accusative pronouns in English is a well-documented phenomenon in the literature (e.g., Kaisse (1983); Selkirk (2014[1996])). The reduction of nominative pronouns, however, has been less discussed. Even if nominative pronoun reduction is indeed less common, it still exists in SCE, as shown in the preliminary database we have built. To build our database, we identified and searched for occurrences of possible reductions, the forms of which can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Full and reduced Nominative pronouns in SCE

	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]

As we will see in the following section, the data clearly demonstrate that nominative reduction exists in SCE.

2.1 Methodology

Our aim was to build a corpus of natural spoken data representing the most formal Standard Canadian English we could access easily online, taken from semi-formal interviews broadcast by prominent Canadian news sources or similarly formal venues (e.g. Radio Canada, the CBC).

We aimed to collect at least 10 occurrences of each possible reduction to verify that the reductions found were not errors. Depending on the conversation topic, some pronouns, and

[1] Of course, OT allows for a FAITHFULNESS contraint to supersede augmentation of the pronominal form, but such a constraint would have to be specific to sentence-initial pronominal forms, a clear violation of Modularity (see Newell and Sailor (in press) for relevant discussion).

therefore some reductions, were produced more frequently than others, making them easier to find. For instance, the pronouns *I*, *you*, and *it* appeared more often than the other nominative pronouns. Given the one-on-one nature of the interview format, that these pronouns were the most common is unsurprising. We also narrowed our online search to content with the highest level of formality possible. We postulate that if such reductions occur in formal contexts, they are likely to occur even more frequently in less formal situations. This selection, seen in Table 2, ensured both the reliability of the recordings and the presence of spontaneous, yet controlled, speech where speakers naturally alternate between full and reduced forms.

Table 2. Online sources consulted

Sources
• CBC News
• Radio Canada : Q with Tom Power
• TedTalks
• University of Manitoba Indigenous YouTube channel, Department of Indigenous Studies
• Aboriginal People's Television Network: National News
• PBS: Brief But Spectacular
• Ludum YouTube channel (Training management and performance analysis)
• Maclean's YouTube channel
• Nobel Prize YouTube channel
• Oregon Humanities Center YouTube channel
• The Daily Show
• Toronto Sun
• CTV: W5

We excluded from the collection of data any sections of the dialogues involving yes/no questions, laughs, very informal conversation (i.e. obvious change of register), contractions (e.g., *I'm, You're*), and possible non-Canadian speakers. The goal during the listening/data-collection process was to find a wide variety of reductions, and to verify the consistency of nominative reduction phenomena across a variety of speakers. Therefore, we listened to a small part of each source consulted, with the idea that if several reductions occurred within the first few minutes of an interview, they would likely continue to appear throughout the rest of the dialogue. Thus, the number of occurrences collected for each source (and therefore the number of occurrences present in the database) does not correspond to the actual total number of nominative reductions present in each source.

Although nominative reduction is not the norm in formal registers, it is still consistently found across speakers. An interesting future project would be to detail the frequency and context of occurrence of weak nominative forms within a discourse. In line with the discussion above, we predict that in non-interview / less formal situations, the number of reductions will be higher than in the formal interviews in this pilot study.

The corpus includes 34 speakers, balanced by gender (17 female and 17 male) and divided into two broad age groups (under 50 and over 50).

Table 3. Demographics of speakers in the database

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

Each occurrence of a nominative reduction was collected and annotated using multiple variables, including pronunciation (i.e. what form was realized among the possible reductions, see Table 1), syntactic environment/context (e.g., Sentence-initial), and demographic information for the speaker. Representative examples of sentence-initial nominative pronoun reduction can be seen here:

(3) "I [ə] thought, well maybe that's why we have two eyes..."
Chris Hadfield, TEDTalk: Mar 19, 2014
Chris Hadfield: What I learned from going blind in space | TED Talk (7m58s)

(4) "You [jə] know it's amazing what you say..."
Sandie Rinaldo on CTV News: Jan 19, 2024
'I'm Sandie Rinaldo': Watch the full CTV News special | YouTube (3m06s)

In short, the decision to exclusively collect data from semi-formal interviews allowed us to strengthen our initial hypothesis, namely that nominative pronouns do undergo reduction in SCE, including in non-contracted sentence-initial positions. The spoken data collected thus provided us with a solid support for the first author's native intuitions regarding the reduction of nominative pronouns.

2.2 Results

The resulting database is comprised of a total of 103 annotated tokens:

Table 4. Distribution of reduced pronouns annotated in the database

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

The data in Table 4 demonstrated different levels of vocalic reduction, and the variation in consonant pronunciation (loss of [h] in *he*) that has been discussed in the literature as evidence for an allomorphic analysis of pronoun reduction in English (Kaisse 1983; Zwicky 1970; Selkirk 2014[1996]; Tyler 2019). The variation in vocalic reduction is not particular to pronoun reduction, and in §3 we will see a proposal in which the loss of [h] (or loss of [ð] in accusative *them*) is also easily captured in the regular phonology of SCE. The data here show that semi-formal contexts exhibit clear instances of weak nominative pronominal forms, supporting our hypothesis that pronoun reduction is not restricted to informal or everyday speech:

Table 5. Representative examples

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)

When examining the gender distribution for each reduced pronoun, male speakers produce more reductions for *I, we, you* and *he*, and female speakers produce more reductions for *she, it* and *they*. However, given the limited size of our database, no general conclusions can be drawn at this stage of the study regarding the demographic distribution of nominative reductions. The phonological analysis of these reductions is discussed in the following section.

3. Reduction's not allomorphy. It's phonology.

3.1 The cross-linguistic reduction pattern and its relation to underlying forms

Much work has been done on the fact that weak pronouns (and function words) are unstressed (Inkelas and Zec 1990, 1993; Selkirk 2014[1996], 2011; Truckenbrodt 2007; Ito and Mester 2018; Tyler 2019), but none adequately accounts for the segmental alternations seen, and most see function word reduction as allomorphic. Newell and Scheer (ms. 2025) argue that weakness is derived at the syntax-phonology interface, and propose that the lack of stress in reducted function words has the same source as the (potential) loss of segments. They find that there is a cross-linguistic tendency for reduced forms to be comprised of a subset of the segments of strong forms; a pattern that only supports a strictly phonological analysis of reduction. This is the case, as morpheme-specific allomorphy within any particular languages would not predict the cross-linguistic pattern. Examples of these segmental subsets can be seen in (5)-(9) (examples from Newell and Scheer (ms. 2025)).

(5) English ACC pronouns
- a. I like **her** [həɹ]
- b. I like'**r** [ɹ̩]

(6) English NOM pronouns
- a. **He** likes you [híj]
- b. **He** likes ya [ə/ɪ/ij]

(7) Hebrew possessive pronouns
- a. **Shelahem** [ʃelaém]
- b. Hasefer **shelahem** [ʃlaem]
  'Their book'

(8) Haitian Creole pronouns
- a. Jean remet **moi** liv la [mwɛ́]
- b. Jean we**m** [m]
  'Jean saw me'

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

Newell and Scheer (ms. 2025) propose that weak alternating forms, such as those shown in Table 4 above, are lexicalized as underspecified for syllabic structure. It is proposed that

alternation in the output forms is a signal to the learner to underspecify structure in the underlying forms of lexical items. The underlying representation of nominative pronouns is such that most segments are floating, and that each pronoun is lexicalized with a single CV syllable (for a discussion of CVCV phonology, see Scheer (2004)).

Table 6. The underlying forms of SCE nominative pronouns

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

3.2 How to derive full and reduced nominative pronouns in SCE

In order to derive the full and reduced forms of function words, Newell and Scheer (ms. 2025) appeal to three independently-motivated tools. The first, seen in Table 6, is underspecification. The second is cyclic spell out, or phases (Chomsky 2001), and the third is the insertion of syllabic space during the derivation. We will briefly outline these tools here, but for more detail see Newell and Scheer (ms. 2025).[2]

The literature on the status, labels, and sizes of phases and their spell out domains is large and varied. See Newell (in press) for an overview. The literature on the different sizes of pronominal structures is in agreement that weak pronouns and clitics have a subset of the syntactic structure that strong pronouns have (Cardinaletti and Starke 1999; Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002). Newell and Scheer (ms. 2025) mobilize this syntactic distinction to propose that weak pronouns are not independent phases, while strong pronouns are: weak pronouns are DPs (DPs lacking phasal functional structure), while strong pronouns are D*Ps (DPs containing phasal functional structure).

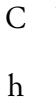
This distinction in phasehood engenders another distinction: Spell out is argued to insert empty syllable structure in English (a CV within the CVCV framework) at the left edge of independent phases (Scheer 2012; D'Alessandro and Scheer 2015). The proposal that empty syllable structure marks left edges of phonological domains is used to explain phonological patterns that emerge cross-linguistically at the left edge of domains, and not only for the analysis of pronominal strength.

[2]This ms. is available on request. See also the related conference handouts on the first author's website: here.

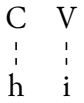
The two tools above lead to the following derivation of reduced *he* in the regular phonology of SCE:

(10) Spell out of DP [ɪ/ij][3]

a. UR



b. linking of segments



In the above derivation, at the spell out of the non-phasal DP leads to a phonological computation that includes only the underspecified UR of the pronoun. The floating segments link. As the stress algorithm of English is only triggered by the presence of a binary foot, and the pronoun is monosyllabic, stress does not apply to the derivation. This unstressed syllable will therefore 'lean' on a phonological item in its environment, and its vowel will reduce, per the normal phonology of English. In the case that the nominative pronoun is sentence-initial, this leaning will necessarily be to the right.

The [h] in English is well known for only being pronounced word-initially or at the beginning of a stressed syllable. These two domains form a natural class of domains where syllable structure is introduced during a derivation. Ségéral and Scheer (2008) propose that [h] is a geminate, requiring this extra syllable space to be realized overtly. This explains the distinction in pronunciation between *vehicle* and *vehicular*, for example, where the stress algorithm inserts a stress-CV (in blue) to the left of the stressed syllable. This insertion of syllable space to mark stress is not specific to the framework of CVCV Phonology (see also Chierchia (1982); Larsen (1998)).

(11) [ˈvijəkl̩]

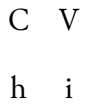
(12) [vəˈhɪkjələɹ]

[3]The presence of the offglide in reduced *he* is dependent on whether the following word begins with a vowel, as is the case for consonant linking in, for example, liaison in French (see the structure of [ij] in (11)). Its full derivation is not discussed here.

Returning to the discussion of pronoun reduction, the phase-initial CV (in yellow below) also offers space for floating segments to link. In (13) the syntactically strong (new discourse referent), D*P, pronoun is a phase. As such, an intial CV is inserted at spell out. In (13a) we have the same UR as in (10), as there is no allomorphy involved in these derivations. A phasal CV is inserted (13b) and the floating segments link from left to right. As this form is now bi-syllabic (a foot) the stress algorithm is triggered, leading to the insertion of the stress CV in (13c). These two insertions of syllable space allow both for the pronunciation of [h] and for the stress on the vowel.

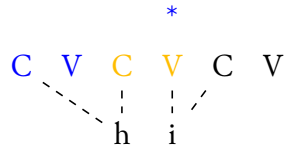
(13) Spell out of D*P [hij]: insertion of the phasal CV and the stress CV

a. UR



b. insert phasal CV, linking of segments

c. insert stress, stress CV, linking of segments



As *he* is the only nominative pronominal form in SCE containing a geminate, it is the only pronoun to evidence variable consonant realization. All other nominative pronouns will realize their initial Cs whether weak or strong, by linking to the consonant position afforded by the UR. In other environments, however, the same proposals will lead to the variable pronunciation of [ð] and [w] in reduced function words such as *them* and *will*.

3.3 What is special about nominative pronouns and the sentence-initial position?

Let us now return to the discussion of the left edge of domains and proposed constraints on prosodic structure like Strong Start. As mentioned in §2, nominative pronoun reduction appears to be less common than, for example, accusative pronoun reduction. What could be the cause of this distinction? It is clearly not the case that weak forms are disallowed at the left edge in SCE. Within the framework of Newell and Scheer (ms. 2025), the distinction can only be captured if the sentence-initial position itself offers a opportunity to insert syllable space. This is exactly what is proposed. On par with the distinction between the non-phasal DP and phasal D*P, it is proposed that some clauses are not phases (CP) and some are (C*P). As the CP domain is not a single head, but a series of heads at the left periphery, this distinction has already been proposed in the syntactic literature. ForceP and FinP, (Tanaka 2016), TopP and ForceP (Totsuka 2013), and a phrase projected in high register (Haegeman 2013) are each respectively proposed to be the subset of phrases in the left periphery (in the sense of Rizzi (1986)) that are phase heads. As these phrases often contain no overt segmental morphemes, any phasal CVs inserted in the C*P domain will be linearized to the immediate left of an initial pronoun, allowing it to be realized as full even when syntactically weak (anaphoric, non-topicalized, non-focused). Accusative pronouns and other function words that are internal to the clause will

not have the same number of opportunities to 'strengthen' their pronunciation due to their position with regard to other overt morphemes and phase edges. This distinction in the rate of reduction for sentence-initial or sentence-internal pronouns is not due to the the clause having any particular requirements that its left edge be phonologically strong.

4. Concluding remarks

This brief article has shown that (i) nominative pronouns in SCE do reduce, and (ii) that there is a plausible phonological analysis of the environments in which these pronouns reduce. It is of note that the proposed analysis, elaborated further in Newell and Scheer (ms. 2025), negates the need to appeal to global phonological strength requirements, as appealed to in some optimality theoretic work. In the future we plan to expand the database of pronominal reduction in SCE, and to continue the larger project of demonstrating how phonological reduction does not need to appeal to alignment or phonological domains, but rather is determined at the level of segments, syllables, and feet.

References

Bennett, Ryan, Emily Elfner, James McCloskey, and Liam Breatnach. 2015. Pronouns and prosody in irish. In *Proceedings of the xiv international congress of celtic studies. dublin: Dublin institute for advanced studies*.

Cardinaletti, Anna and Michal Starke. 1999. The typology of structural deficiency: A case study of the three classes of pronouns. In *Clitics in the languages of Europe*, ed. Henk van Riemsdijk, 145–234. Mouton De Gruyter.

Chierchia, Gennaro. 1982. *An autosegmental theory of raddoppiamento*, 49–62. Amherst: GLSA.

Chomsky, Noam. 2001. Derivation by phase. In *Ken Hale: A life in language*, ed. Michael Kenstowicz, chap 1, 1–52. MIT Press.

D'Alessandro, Roberta and Tobias Scheer. 2015. Modular PIC. *Linguistic Inquiry* 46: 593–624.

Déchaine, Rose-Marie and Martina Wiltschko. 2002. Decomposing pronouns. *Linguistic Inquiry* 33(3): 409–442.

Haegeman, Liliane. 2013. The syntax of registers: Diary subject omission and the privilege of the root. *Lingua* 130: 88–110.

Inkelas, Sharon and Draga Zec. 1990. *The phonology-syntax connection*. University of Chicago Press.

Inkelas, Sharon and Draga Zec. 1993. Auxiliary reduction without empty categories: a prosodic account. In *Working papers of the Cornell Phonetics Laboratory*, vol. 8, 205–253. Cornell.

Ito, J. and A. Mester. 2018. Syntax-prosody faithfulness. In *Western conference on linguistics*.

Kaisse, Ellen M. 1983. The syntax of auxiliary reduction in English. *Language* 59: 93–122.

Larsen, Bergeton Uffe. 1998. *Vowel length, raddoppiamento sintattico and the selection of the definite article in Italian*, 87–102. Paris: Université Paris 8.

Newell, Heather. in press. Phases and phonology. In *Wiley-Blackwell companion to linguistics, second edition*. Wiley-Blackwell. URL https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/008344.

Newell, Heather and Craig Sailor. in press. Minimalism and the syntax-phonology interface. In *The Cambridge handbook of Minimalism and its applications*, ed. Evelina Leivada and Kleanthes Grohmann, chap 8. Cambridge University Press.

Newell, Heather and Tobias Scheer. ms. 2025. Syntactic and phonological underspecification in function words : the case of english pronoun reduction.

Rizzi, Luigi. 1986. Null objects in Italian and the theory of *pro*. *Linguistic Inquiry* 17(3): 501–557.

Scheer, Tobias. 2004. *A lateral theory of phonology. vol.1: What is CVCV, and why should it be?* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Scheer, Tobias. 2012. *Direct interface and one-channel translation. a non-diacritic theory of the morphosyntax-*

phonology interface. vol.2 of A lateral theory of phonology. Berlin: de Gruyter.
Ségéral, Philippe and Tobias Scheer. 2008. *The coda mirror, stress and positional parameters*, 483–518. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
Selkirk, Elisabeth. 2011. The syntax-phonology interface. In *The handbook of phonological theory, vol. 2*, 435–484. Wiley Online Library.
Selkirk, Elisabeth. 2014[1996]. The prosodic structure of function words. In *Signal to syntax: Bootstrapping from speech to grammar in early acquisition*, ed. J.L. Morgan and K. Demuth, 187–213. Psychology Press.
Tanaka, Hiroyoshi. 2016. A minimalist analysis of English topicalization: A phase-based cartographic complementizer phrase (CP) perspective. *Journal of UOEH* 38(4): 279–289.
Totsuka, Masashi. 2013. On phase head in split CP hypothesis. *English Linguistics* 30(1): 204–215.
Truckenbrodt, Hubert. 2007. The syntax-phonology interface. In *The Cambridge handbook of phonology*, ed. P. De Lacy. CUP.
Tyler, Matthew. 2019. Simplifying MATCH WORD: Evidence from English functional categories. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 4(1).
Werle, Adam. 2009. *Word, phrase, and clitic prosody in bosnian, serbian, and croatian*. University of Massachusetts Amherst.
Zwicky, Arnald M. 1970. Auxiliary reduction in English. *Linguistic Inquiry* 323–336.