The person asymmetry:
underspecification of person and number features?
Valentina Bianchi, University of Siena- Köln, February 23rd, 2005

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1. Introduction: the person asymmetry

Benveniste (1946-1970):

❑ The person category is defined by the *corrélation de personnalité* within the dialogue situation. Only first and second person are real persons; "third person" is no person. First and second person pronouns can only be interpreted in relation to a specific and unique discourse situation. The third person category is characterized by its opposition to the marked members of the *corrélation de personnalité*.

❑ In the case of first and second person pronouns, plural number does not imply simple pluralization. The uniqueness and subjectivity of "I" contradict the possibility of pluralization: "we" is not a multiplication of identical objects, but a fusion (*jonction*) between "I" and "not-I". In the majority of languages, pronominal plural does *not* morphologically coincide with nominal plural (1966, 233-235).

Benveniste's insights have been recently implemented in terms of feature underspecification:

* First and second person pronouns are specified for [person]; "third person" pronouns are not.
* "Third person" pronouns are specified for [number]; first and second person pronouns are not.

2. Person underspecification?

2.1. Kayne (2000): French and Italian pronominal systems

First/second person clitics and reflexive *s-* clitics vs. "*l*-clitics":

❑ *l*-clitics contain a word marker for gender, whereas first and second person singular clitics are pure person morphemes with an epenthetic vowel:

(3)
French	Italian	
l-e	*l-o*	M.SG.
l-a	*l-a*	F.SG.
m-e	*m-i(e)*	1.SG.
t-e	*t-i(e)*	2.SG
s-e	*s-i(e)*	REFL.

* *l*-clitics inflect regularly for plural, whereas first and second person clitics do not; they have independent morphemes. The *s*-clitic is not inflected for plural either:

(4)
French	Italian	
l-es	*l-i*	M.PL
l-es	*l-e*	F.PL.
nous (*m-es)	*ci(e)*	1.PL
vous, (*t-es)	*vi(e)*	2.PL
*s-es		

- the *l-* morpheme does not give rise to possessive pronouns, contrary to the first and second person morphemes and the *s-* morpheme:

(5)   French   Italian
        l-on   *l-uo*   POSS.

        m-on   *m-io*   POSS. 1.SG.
        t-on   *t-uo*   POSS. 2.SG.
        s-on   *s-uo*   POSS. "3."

   l - pronouns are (DPs) unspecified for person, whereas first and second person pronouns are (NPs) specified for person. The reflexive-impersonal clitic *si-se* is a "zero person".

   only *l* -clitics, but not [person] clitics, are specified for [number] (and [gender]).

	se	*me*	*te*	*le/la*	*nous*	*vous*	*les*
PERSON	0	1st	2nd		4th	5th	-
NUMBER				SG.			PL.

Table 1: Kayne (2000)

2.2. **Anagnostopoulou (2003a,b): The Person-Case Constraint**

(6) Person-Case Constraint (Bonet 1991, ch. 4; 1994): If there are a Dative clitic and an Accusative clitic, the Accusative must be third person.

This constraint excludes the following clitic combinations:

- a third person Dative clitic co-occurring with a first or second person Accusative clitic, in either order:

(7)   a. * Mi gli ha affidato.   (* 1-ACC, 3-DAT)
            1SG 3SG has entrusted

        b. * Gli mi ha affidato.   (* 3-DAT, 1-ACC)
            3SG 1SG has entrusted
            'He entrusted me to him.'

        c. * Ti gli ha affidato.   (* 2-ACC, 3-DAT)
            2G 3SG has entrusted

        d. * Gli ti ha affidato.   (* 3-DAT, 2-ACC)
            3SG 2SG has entrusted
            'He entrusted you to him.'

- a first or second person Dative clitic co-occurring with a first or second person Accusative clitic, in either order:

(8)   a. * Mi ti ha affidato.   (* 1-DAT, 2-ACC or *2-DAT, 1-ACC)
            1SG 2SG has entrusted

        b. * Ti mi ha affidato.   (* 1-DAT, 2-ACC or * 2-DAT, 1-ACC)
            2G 1SG has entrusted
            'He entrusted me to you/you to me.'

Certain speakers actually accept combinations like (8): there is idiolectal variation (cf. Bonet 1991, 179 ff.; 1994, 40-41). These speakers have a "weak" PCC.

- The only grammatical clitic combinations involve a third person Accusative clitic preceded by a Dative clitic of any person:

(9)   a. Me lo ha affidato.   (√ 1-DAT, 3-ACC)
        1SG 3SG has entrusted
        'He entrusted him to me.'

       b. Te lo ha affidato.   (√ 2-DAT, 3-ACC)
        2SG 3SG has entrusted
        'He entrusted him to you.'

       c. Glielo ha affidato.   (√ 3-DAT, 3-ACC)
        3SG 3SG has entrusted
        'He entrusted him to him.'

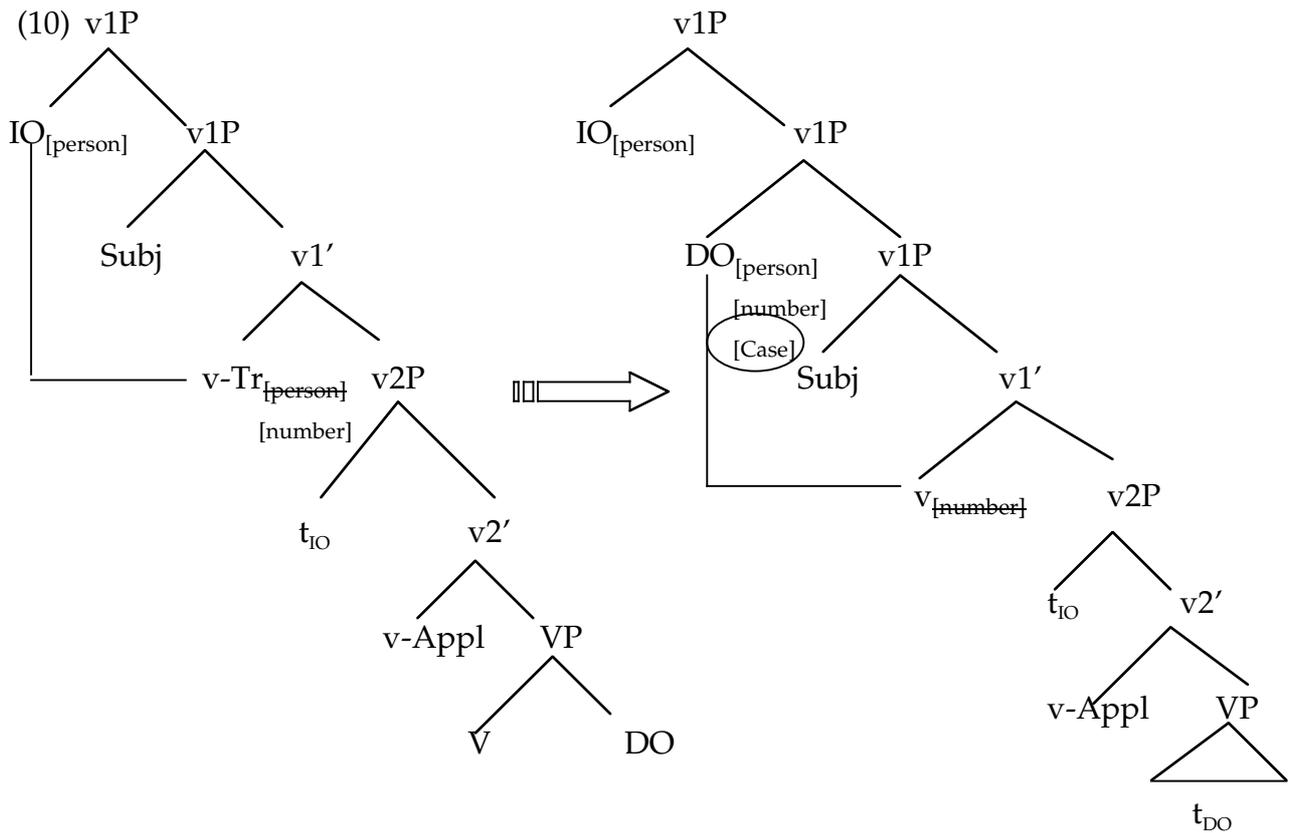|	1p DO	2p DO	3p DO
1p IO		*/% mi ti	me lo
2p IO	*/% mi ti		te lo
3p IO	* gli mi	* gli ti	glie lo

Table 2. The PCC In Italian.

Anagnostopoulou (2003a,b) – cf. also Adger & Harbour (2003):

i) first/second person and reflexive (*s-*) clitics are [+person]

ii) Dative third person clitics are [+person], because Dative arguments are typically human/animate and denote a "point of view holder" (cf. Boeckx 2000, § 3.4.3); however, they have no number (cf. they do not trigger participle agreement?)

iii) Direct object third person clitics are instead not specified for person

iv) v-Tr has only one person feature to be checked

v) The Dative argument moves first to Spec, v-Tr, being closer to v-Tr, and the direct object subsequently "tucks in" an inner Spec.
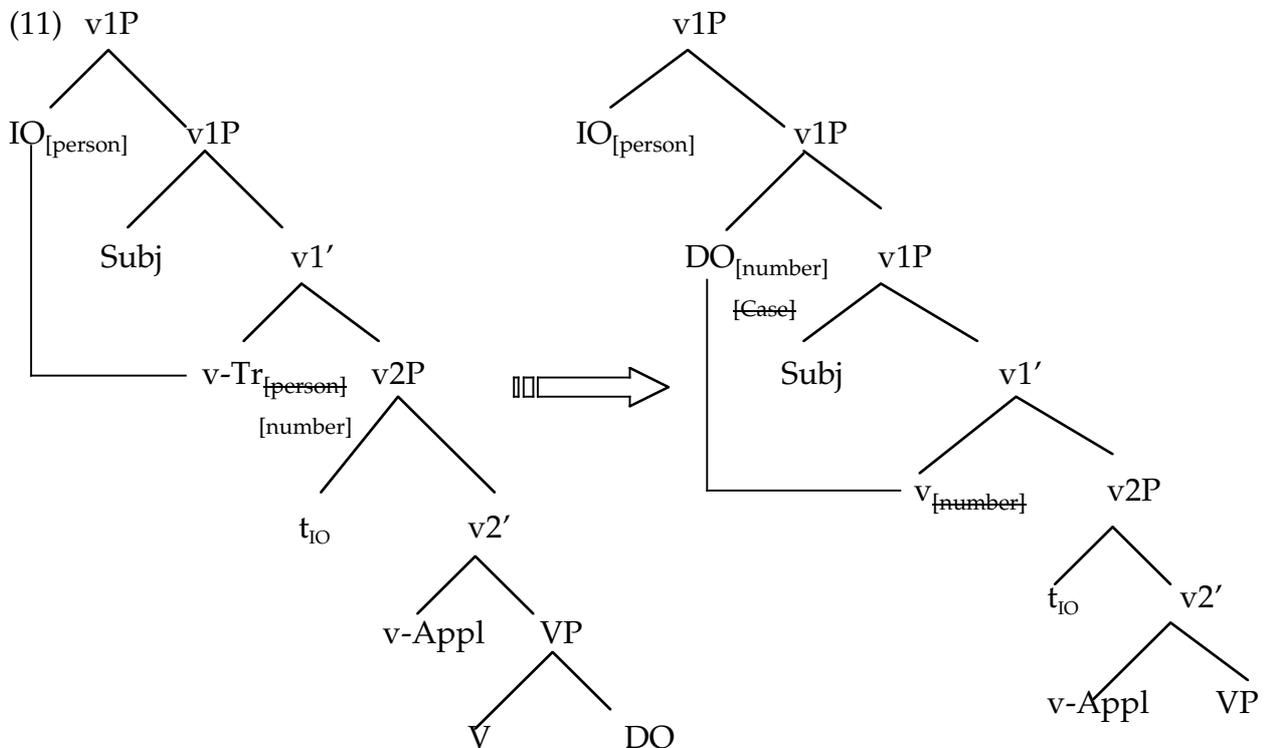
	mi	*ti*	*lo/la*	*gli/le*	*ci*	*vi*	*li/le*
PERSON/PARTICIPANT	+	+	Ø	-	+	+	Ø
NUMBER			SG.	Ø			PL.

Table 3. Anagnostopoulou (2003a,b)

In (7) and (8), both clitics have a [person] feature. The IO checks [person] on v-Tr; then the direct object tucks in and checks [number], but its [person] feature remains unchecked. Phi-features checking is incomplete: the DO 's structural Case feature remains unchecked.

(10)

v1P

IO[person] v1P

Subj v1'

v-Tr~~[person]~~ v2P
[number]

t_IO v2'

v-Appl VP

V DO

⇒

v1P

IO[person] v1P

DO[person] v1P
[number]
([Case]) Subj v1'

v~~[number]~~ v2P

t_IO v2'

v-Appl VP

t_DO

In (9), instead, the IO checks [person] on v-Tr and the DO checks [number]. Since the DO has no [person], this is a complete phi-features checking: the Case of the DO is checked off.

(11)

v1P

IO[person] v1P

Subj v1'

v-Tr~~[person]~~ v2P
[number]

t_IO v2'

v-Appl VP

V DO

⇒

v1P

IO[person] v1P

DO[number] v1P
~~[Case]~~
Subj v1'

v~~[number]~~ v2P

t_IO v2'

v-Appl VP

Problem 1. French and Italian IO *l*-clitics are assumed to be [-person], but they have no [person] specification by Kayne's criteria (cf. Kayne 2000, 140).

Problem 2. In Italian, reflexive *si* patterns with third person, in that (a) it can co-occur with a Dative first or second person clitic, and (b) it can also co-occur with a Dative third person clitic.

(12)   a. mi si è rivolto
      1SG REFL is addressed 'he addressed himself to me'
    b. ti si è rivolto
      2SG REFL is addressed

(13)   gli si è rivolto
    3.M.SG.DAT REFL is addressed

In French, instead, *se* patterns with first/second person clitics in that it cannot cooccur with a (first, second or) third person Dative clitic:

(14) * Elle se lui est donnée entièrement.
     she REFL 3..SG.DAT is given entirely

In Anagnostopoulou (2003b), the possibility of Ital. (12)-(13) is accounted for by the parametrized option of Multiple Agree, which would also account for the acceptability of (8) above for some speakers of Italian, Spanish, Catalan, Occitan etc. For the same speakers, the ungrammaticality of third person IO + first/second person IO clusters, as in (7) above, is due to the conflicting [-person] and [+person] specification of the two clitics in the Multiple Agree configuration.

However, note that (12) and (13) are fully acceptable even for those Italian speakers that reject first+second person clusters like (8) above. Then, in view of the general acceptability of (12)-(13), Ital. *si* must **not** be specified for person: this is contrary to Kayne's proposal (cp. Table 1).

Problem 3. This analysis requires three distinct specification possibilities:
- complete underspecification (Ø) (DO third person, Italian *si?*)
- negative specification: [-person] (or [-participant]) (IO third person)
- positive specification: [+person] (or [+participant]) (first/second person, French *se*)

The categorization of both first and second person clitics as [+person] (or [+participant]) is insufficient to distinguish the two. Also, *s*-clitics must be collapsed with one of the other categories. On Kayne's (2000) view, [person] is not a binary feature.
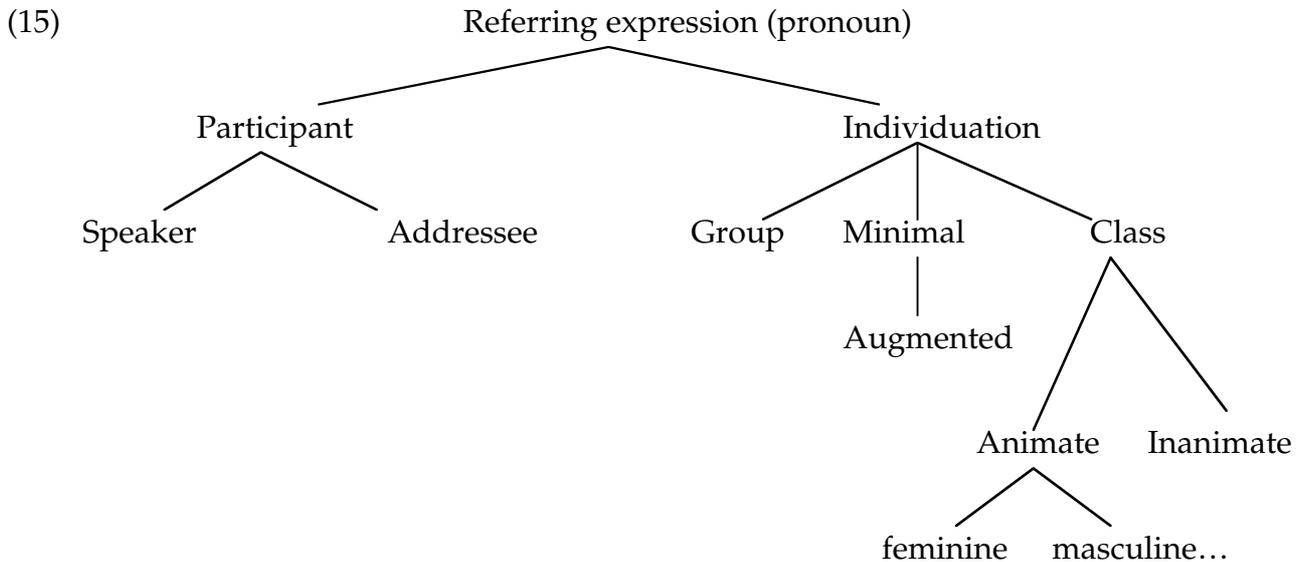
It is obviously possible to state a three-way distinction as in Table 3 by using two privative features: cf. e.g. Hanson (2003,82-88) (within a revision of Harley & Ritter's 2002 feature geometry):

1st, 2nd person = [sentient], [speech act participant] ([speaker])
Dative 3rd person = [sentient], Ø
Accusative 3rd person = Ø, Ø
(French *se* = [sentient]? What about Italian *si?*)

2.3. Intermediate conclusions:

- A direct implementation of Benveniste's radical hypothesis, whereby "third person" pronouns are underspecified for [person], is justified on morphological grounds (Kayne 2000; cf. also Ritter 1995) but is incompatible with recent analyses of the Person Case Constraint.

- A binary [± person] feature (Anagnostopoulou, Adger & Harbour) seems insufficient to capture all the relevant distinctions.

2.4. Harley & Ritter's (2002) privative feature geometry

(15)

```
                    Referring expression (pronoun)
                   /                              \
          Participant                          Individuation
          /        \                          /      |       \
    Speaker      Addressee              Group   Minimal    Class
                                                   |        /    \
                                              Augmented  Animate  Inanimate
                                                          /    \
                                                   feminine   masculine…
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"We attribute this distinction between 1st and 2nd person, on the one hand, and 3rd person, on the other, to the fact that the reference of the former is determined by the changing discourse role, whereas the reference of the latter is fixed […]The conceptual distinction between discourse dependence and independence is the external factor which determines the shape of the geometry […] The Individuation node represents those features of a DP which are independent of the discourse, that is, its number and gender. In contrast, the Participant node and its dependents represent those features which depend on the DP's discourse role."

Discourse dependence is **dependence on a discourse role** (speaker vs. hearer).

Problem 1. This feature geometry fails to capture the necessary definiteness of "third person" pronouns (Kayne 2000: "determiner pronouns").

Problem 2. Third person pronouns are only specified for the Individuation node, which, presumably, is also shared by non-pronominal DPs: thus, there is no common feature shared by all pronouns as opposed to nonpronominal DPs (but cf. Kayne 2000, n. 35). Also, it is not obvious how to distinguish indefinite/impersonal third person pronouns, which have distinct licensing conditions in e.g. Hebrew (cp. Ritter 1995, Vainikka & Levy 1999).

2.5. A different perspective on third person pronouns

According to Benveniste, third person pronouns can denote "an infinity of subjects, or none at all". But actually, a (non-expletive) third person pronoun must refer to an individual that is **sufficiently salient** in the context of utterance – either by deixis or by anaphora:

(16) a. (the witness pointing to the defendant) : He is the murderer.
    b. *John* is happy. Mary has accepted to marry *him*.

If there isn't a sufficiently salient individual, the use of a third person pronoun is inappropriate.
A pronoun bound by a quantifier does not refer to a specific individual but is interpreted as an occurrence of the variable bound by the quantifier:

(17) Every man$_1$ loves his$_1$ mother.
    $\forall x$ such that x is a man, x loves x's mother

In both cases, pronouns are interpreted as **variables** (cf. e.g. Heim & Kratzer 1998, chapter 9). Variables do not have a fixed reference, but depend on an assignment of a value. In case of Q-binding like (17), the variable eventually gets bound and no longer depends on any assignment. In cases like (16), instead, the pronoun remains as a free variable and its interpretation crucially depends on a specific **assignment of value**. The assignment is formally represented as a function which assigns to the numerical index of the pronoun an individual of the domain:

(18) a. He_1 is the murderer.
      [$1 \rightarrow$ John Smith]

The **Appropriateness Condition** states that an utterance context c is appropriate for an LF ϕ only if c determines a variable assigment g_c whose domain includes every index that has a free occurrence in ϕ.

2.5.1. **The presuppositional treatment of grammatical features**

Let us adopt the presuppositional treatment of grammatical features**.** For instance, the feature [feminine] expresses the partial identity function [$\lambda x.x$ is feminine]: This function "lets out" whatever value the assignment function gives to the pronoun's index in case this value is a feminine individual, and yields no value otherwise (as a result, there will be no interpretation for the overall LF).

Schlenker (2003, 82 ff.) extends the presuppositional treatment to person features (presuppositions are written within curly brackets):

(19)a. $[[x\{+author^*(x)\}]]^{c,s}$ is defined only if $s(x)$ is the author of c. If so, $[[x\{+author^*(x)\}]]^{c,s} = s(x)$

   b.$[[x\{+hearer^*(x)\}]]^{c,s}$ is defined only if $s(x)$ is a hearer of c. If so, $[[x\{+hearer^*(x)\}]]^{c,s} = s(x)$

(where c is the context of the actual speech act and s is an assignment of values to variables that properly represents the referential intentions of the speaker at the time and world of the context.)

It is tempting to extend this system to 3^{rd} person by positing a negative presupposition […] with 3^{rd} person = [-1^{st} person, -2^{nd} person]:

(20)a.$[[x\{-author^*(x)\}]]^{c,s}$ is defined only if $s(x)$ is not the author of c. If so, $[[x\{-author^*(x)\}]]^{c,s} = s(x)$

   b.$[[x\{-hearer^*(x)\}]]^{c,s}$ is defined only if $s(x)$ is not a hearer of c. If so, $[[x\{-hearer^*(x)\}]]^{c,s} = s(x)$

But…

(21) [A person looking at himself in the mirror] He must be me, in fact he is me!

"[…] The generalization appears to be that 'he' can be used whenever it is not presupposed that the variable denotes the speaker or hearer of the actual speech act." Then:

(22)Use [–author*] just in case [+author*] would have yielded a presupposition failure.
      Use [–hearer*] just in case [+hearer*] would have yielded a presupposition failure.

The negatively specified features are the elsewhere case. They might be avoided if we assume a principle of "Maximize Presupposition" (Schlenker 2003, 85).

2.5.2. **My proposal**

In each specific instance of discourse, third person pronouns are actually restricted to refer to a contextually salient individual, via a specific assignment function determined by the context (and representing the speaker's referential intentions). So via the assignment function, third person pronouns too are context-dependent. The specification [-speaker], [-addressee] does not capture this fact (maybe it is also too strong, in the light of (21)).

An alternative:

�q first, second and "third person" pronouns share a feature [context-determined], whereby they must be assigned a value by the context-determined assignment fucntion s;

�q first and second person pronouns also have the additional specification for the features [speaker] or [addressee], encoding presuppositions on the discourse role played by s(x)

ᵠ   "Third person" pronouns are not specified for the features [speaker] and [addressee]; accordingly, they denote those contextually determined referents that are not presupposed to be either the speaker or the hearer (Schlenker 2003)

(23) a. 1P = [context-determined], [speaker]
  b. 2P = [context-determined], [addressee]
  c. 3P = [context-determined]   or

(24) a. 1P = [context-determined], [participant], [speaker]
  b. 2P = [context-determined], [participant]
  c. 3P = [context-determined]   (cf. Harley & Ritter 2002)

((24) yields a "feature specification" hierarchy of persons).

NB1: [context-determined] is distinct from definite/familiar: a non-pronominal DP can be definite/familiar without depending on the contextually determined assignment function.

NB2: Safir (in press) argues instead that first and second person pronouns denote **constant functions** which, applied to a context c, yield the speaker and the hearer(s) of c respectively. On the contrary, "third person" pronouns do not denote a constant function. Even under this approach, the denotation of all pronouns is given by a context-dependent function (via a constant function, or via an assignment function).

NB3: [context-determined] is irrelevant in the case of bound third person pronouns, as in (17). The problem actually generalizes to **all** the phi-features of bound pronouns; see § 4 below.

3. **Number underspecification?**

Kayne (2000): first and second person "plural" clitics lack a [number] feature.

Wechsler (2002): a similar claim for subject first and second person "plural" forms:

 (25)a. Nous avons toujours été loyal envers la grammaire générative.   (authorial *nous)*
    1.PL have-1.PL always been loyal-SG to generative grammar
  b. Vous êtes loyal.   (formal address *vous)*
    2.PL be-2.PL loyal-SG

- Apparent plural number agreement on the finite verb is actually person agreement. *Nous* and *vous* are **associative persons** (they refer to the speaker/hearer plus associates), underspecified for [number]

- "Semantic agreement" on the non-finite predicate results from the feature [± aggregate] specified **on the predicate.**

	je	*tu*	*il/elle*	*nous*	*vous*	*ils/elles*
PERSON	1s	2s		1A	2A	
NUMBER			SG.			PL
SEMANTICS	={S}	={H$_{intimate}$}	={…}	⊇{S}	⊇{H}	={…}

Table 4: Wechsler (2002)

Problem 1. In Italian authorial/majesty first person triggers plural agreement on the nonfinite predicate as well. Here a syntactic [number] feature on the authorial first person form seems unavoidable (26a). On the contrary, formal address second person patterns as in French (26b).

(26) a. Noi   siamo   convinti/*o che…
        "1.PL" be-"1.PL"   convinced-M.PL/*M.SG. that
      b. Voi   siete   leale.
        "2.PL"   be-"2.PL"   loyal-SG

This variation suggests that the proposed underspecification for (syntactic) [number] on first and second person pronouns cannot be justified on the basis of Benveniste's "semantic" insight (viz., that they do not refer to a "chorus" of speakers or addressees), which holds for all these pronouns.

Problem 2. Wechsler (his (27)) claims that the following person complexes are unattested, as predicted by his analysis:

(27) Unattested: (Wechsler's (27))
      1+1 = 'we', mass speaking (e.g. unison)
      2+2 = 'you-all', only present audience

Actually, I believe that the 2+2 combination is attested. Standard contemporary Italian uses the overt feminine third person singular pronoun *Lei* for formal address to a single addressee. The (rare and exceedingly formal) plural form is only used to formally address an audience, and not to refer to a formally addressed hearer plus someone else:

(28)   a. Come Loro certamente sanno, …
            as   they certainly know…
             'as you all certainly know…'
        *   'as you and your associate(s) certainly know…'

Problem 3. The [+aggregate] feature specified on the nonfinite predicate in (25) could be reanalysed, in minimalist terms, as an exceptionally valued [number] feature which is transmitted to the underspecified pronoun via Agree (and becomes interpretable on that category at the C-I interface). But this leads to a paradox in case of derivational underspecification...

4. **Derivational underspecification?**

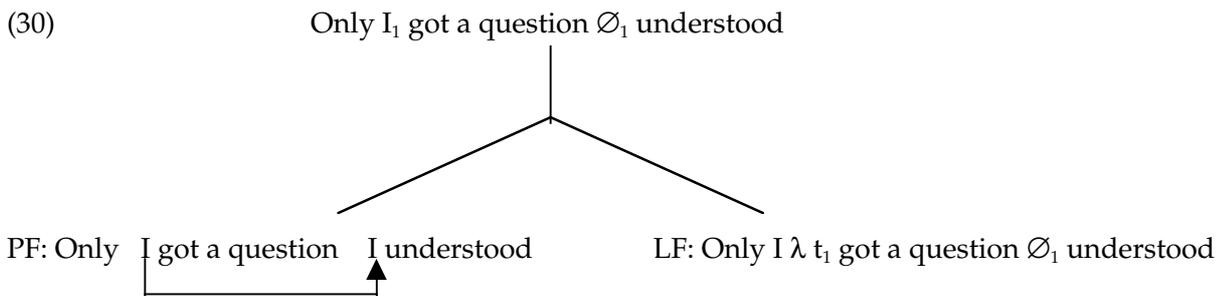Heim's example (cf. Kratzer 1998, von Stechow 2002, Schlenker 2003):

(29) a. Only I did my homework. (Therefore, Peter didn't do his).
      b. Everyone x such that x is different from me didn't do x's homework
      c. LF: [Only I] λ_8 t_8 did 8's homework (cf. von Stechow 2002, 2)

A possible interpretation (29b) is that I am the only individual (in a salient set of alternatives) who did her own homework, whereas the others didn't do their homeworks.

For this interpretation to be possible, the first person feature of the possessive must not be interpreted, hence it must not be present on the possessive in LF (cf. 29c).

Von Stechow (2002): **Feature deletion under semantic binding.** Delete the features to all variables that are semantically bound.

Kratzer (1998): **Zero pronoun hypothesis**. The apparent first person possessive pronoun in (29a) is actually a zero pronoun $\varnothing$ underspecified for all the grammatical phi-features, and bearing only an index. This pronoun gets its grammatical features from the antecedent in the PF (i.e., morpho-phonological-phonetic) branch of the derivation. Zero pronouns must have an antecedent.

(30)   Only I_1 got a question $\varnothing_1$ understood

PF: Only I got a question I understood   LF: Only I λ t_1 got a question $\varnothing_1$ understood

(NB: For Kratzer (1998) the distribution of zero pronouns is restricted, crucially involving a local relation between Agreement heads. See also Alonso-Ovalle & D'Introno (1999) for an extension of this approach.)

--> Under either the feature deletion approach or the zero pronoun hypothesis, bound pronouns turn out not to have any phi-feature specification in the Logical Form. [1]

Consider from this perspective the following pair:

(31) [Solo voi] pensate di PRO essere stato criticato.   (... il vostro collega non lo pensa)
     only you-PL. think-2.PL. *di* be-INF. been-M.SG. criticized-M.SG. (SINGLE ADDRESSEE ,POLITE)

(32) [Solo voi] pensate di PRO essere stati criticati.   (... il vostro collega non lo pensa).
     only you-PL. think-2.PL. *di* be-INF. been-M.PL. criticized-M.PL. (ADDRESSEE + S.O. ELSE)
     'Only you believe that you have been criticized... your colleague does not believe so.'

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[1] However, the zero pronoun hypothesis predicts that bound pronouns also have a different overt syntax from free pronoun: specifically, they have no phi-features to check in the syntax. With respect to the phenomena discussed in § 3, I don't know that there is any difference between bound and referential 3rd person pronouns. Of course, one can assume with Bonet (1991, 1994) that the PCC applies in the morphology.

Under either von Stechow's or Kratzer's account, bound PRO is underspecified for any phi-feature when entering the C-I component. By locality of agreement, the [plural] feature on the participle in the control clause is transmitted to PRO, but not to the matrix controller (*voi*), which is by hypothesis underspecified for [number]. If PRO is interpreted at the interface as a radically underspecified pronoun, the [plural] feature should remain uninterpreted, which is plainly false: (31) and (22) are not equivalent!

4.1. **My proposal**

- Benveniste's original observation (that *nous* does not necessarily refer to a chorus of speakers, nor *vous* to a set of addressees) cannot be directly implemented as syntactic underspecification for the [number] feature.

- Benveniste's insight can be reinterpreted in the light of Darlympe & Kaplan's (2000) observation that person, number and gender are (syntactically and semantically) **non-distributive** features: they are properties of a whole conjunction and they do not distribute to all the individual conjuncts. Plural noun phrases, like DP conjunctions, denote a plurality; it is reasonable to assume that phi-features remain **semantically non-distributive** in this case as well. Thus, a 1P or 2P feature on a plural DP does not (necessarily) distribute to all the individuals in the plurality that the DP denotes. Hence, a personal pronoun is consistent with a [plural] specification (see Schlenker 2002 for a different proposal).

- Politeness forms may be syntactically underspecified for [number] or not (cf. (25)-(26)). Agreement with politeness forms requires a less restrictive agreement system than the minimalist one, like other instances of semantic agreement (cf. a.o. Pollard & Sag 1994, ch. 2). In particular, in Bianchi (2005) it is argued that finite number agreement is high in the functional structure and parasitic on person agreement, whereas non-finite number agreement is low in the functional structure (i.e. immediately above vP) and is sensitive to "semantic" number.

5. General conclusions

- Benveniste's insights on the person asymmetry cannot be directly implemented in terms of underspecification for [person] or [number] features.

- [Person] must be decomposed into a feature hierarchy

- Syntactic [number] does not straightforwardly coincide with "semantic number" (cf. Heycock & Zamparelli, forthcoming for extensive discussion).

Valentina Bianchi
Dipartimento di Scienze della Comunicazione – Università di Siena
Piazza S. Francesco 8, Siena, Italy
vale_bianchi@libero.it

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