What do we mean by *we*?

PAUL RASTALL

Some thoughts on a complex pronoun

SOME EXPRESSIONS seem so familiar to us that we do not bother to reflect on the meanings they convey. We can be surprised to learn that in some languages, like Malay, it is necessary to distinguish between *we* referring to the speaker and the interlocutor (*kita*) and *we* referring to the speaker and someone other than the interlocutor (*kami*). Both possibilities are covered by the English *we*. Only the context will tell us which is meant. On further reflection, however, we can see that *we* covers a variety of other possibilities in English.

Our dictionaries and grammars are rather variable in their treatment of the range of meaning in *we*. The latest *Concise Oxford Dictionary* entry (1999, p. 1621) tells us, for example, about *we*:

> **Pron.** [1st person pl.] **1.** Used by a speaker to refer to himself or herself and one or more other people considered together or regarded as in the same category > people in general. **2.** Used in formal contexts for or by a royal person, or by a writer, referring to himself or herself. **3.** You (used condescendingly).

The first possibility corresponds to the obvious cases of inclusive or exclusive *we* considered above

- *We can leave now* (the speaker and the person(s) addressed)
- *We had a cup of coffee while we were waiting for you* (the speaker and one or more others, but not the person(s) addressed)

The possibility of referring to "people in general" including the speaker seems to be inherently different and cover such cases as:

- *We live and learn* (i.e. all people)
- *We offer courses for all levels of language learner at this school* (the collectivity of people working in the school as an institution).

The possibility of a "royal" *we* or an "editorial" *we* is covered by the second sense.

The third possibility of a condescending *we* covers cases such as

- *We aren't behaving very well today, are we?*
- *We can do better than that, can't we?*

and is, in fact, an address to one or more other persons, i.e. it functions as a second person pronoun.

The earlier edition of the *COD* (1974, p. 1476) covers similar ground. It informs us that *we* is the "plural subject of *I*". That rather elliptical expression is meant to be adequate to explain the inclusive and exclusive uses, although it seems to imply bizarrely that *we* is somehow a form of *I*. It goes on to tell us that *we* is used "by royal persons in proclamations etc. instead of *I*", which is somewhat more explicit than in the recent edition, but stops short of telling us that this is a first person *singular* use), and "as a collective name for speaker and all others of the class that context shows him to be representing for the moment". Thus, the earlier edition distinguishes the collective sense more clearly. It is an oddity that in addition to the "royal" use of *we* as a 1st person singular, we also find *us* (often /z/) used as a

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1st person singular in several non-standard varieties, e.g. *gizzit* ('give us it') for *give me it*.

Webster's 3rd New International Dictionary of the English Language (vol. 3, p. 2588) contains a more subtle analysis. It gives the following possibilities. "1a. I and the rest of a group that includes me… you and I and another or others… I and another or others not including you". Not unnaturally, the collective sense in "We, the people, … do ordain… and establish in this constitution…" is found here and is quoted merely as a special case of the inclusive and/or exclusive use rather than as a different case, as (correctly so) in the 5th *COD*. *Webster's* also recognises "1b. people in general" and the "royal" use and the "editorial" use, although it is somewhat more specific on the latter point of style – "used by editors and other writers to keep an impersonal character or to avoid the egotistical sound of a repeated I". Finally, *Webster's* points out that the second person use of *we* may not be only condescending. It could be coaxing (as to a child), encouraging (as to a patient – *How are we today?*), or sarcastic.

Our grammars are generally rather disappointing in their treatment of *we*. Strang (1969), Thomson and Martinet (1980), and Huddleston (1988) have nothing to say on the usage of *we*. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* (1994) does little more than list *we* as a pronoun and implicitly criticise the notion that *we* "replaces" a noun or nominal. *The Collins COBUILD English Usage* (1992, p. 766) is less subtle than the dictionary entries considered. It tells us only

> "You use *we* to refer to yourself with one or more other people… You can use *we* to include the person or people you are speaking or writing to"

and thus misses the second person, "collective", "royal" and "editorial" uses of *we* altogether. Jespersen (1933, p. 147) gives the standard inclusive and exclusive meanings and adds:

> "The plural *we* means I (the speaker) and someone else or some others. It is therefore often necessary to specify who else is included: *we gentlemen, we Yorkshiremen, we Europeans…*"

The latter use looks very much like the "collective" one noted above (although we might question the claim that the specification of *we* is "often" needed). Jespersen also notes (p. 148) the "paternal" *we* referred to above as "condescending", "coaxing", "encouraging" or "sarcastic", and also a "generic" *we* used "instead of the formal *one*" in *We live to learn* (p. 151).

These sketchy treatments are rather disappointing and fail to elucidate points of usage for the learner.

A fuller treatment, if a somewhat less accessible one for the learner, is offered by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik in their *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (1985). They correctly note (p. 335) that the term "pronoun" is a "misnomer", if understood as a word replacing or standing for another noun or nominal group, in the case of *we* (and *you* and *I*). "Pronoun" can be understood as "a varied class of closed-class words with nominal function". They go on to suggest that the meaning of *we* includes reference to "the originator of the message, speaker or writer… the addressee, whether hearer or reader, whether singular or plural… [and]… any other referents" (p. 340). They go on to recognise a special type in the collective, *We the undersigned…*, although it is not really clear why this differs from the exclusive type defined later. They then distinguish inclusive and exclusive meanings as including references to the addressee(s) and "other referents" or excluding the addressees, respectively.

Quirk *et al*. then identify a number of "special" uses of *we*. These are:

1. the "inclusive authorial" use (p. 350) in *As we saw in chapter 3, …*, although it is not clear how this differs from the inclusive use previously defined, since it is a reference to the writer and the addressee(s).
2. the "editorial" use in *As we showed a moment ago…* (This use corresponds to the one described in *Webster's* as avoidance of an egotistical *I*. It is, like the "royal" *we*, in effect a first person singular usage, as it does not include any other person or persons in its reference, whether addressees or not.)
3. the "rhetorical" use in *In the 19th Century, we ignored the poor…* (This involves an associative sense in which the speaker or writer includes himself or herself and all of the addressees in a wider category, which might otherwise be regarded as *they*, i.e. only the idea of identification with a group (e.g. all English people of whatever time or place) leads to the choice of *we* rather than *they*, even though the writer or speaker and the

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Reference	Type
1. to the speaker only (1st ps. **sg**.)	
a. by a royal person	"royal" *we*
b. by another speaker or writer	"editorial" *we* or non-standard use of *us*
2. to an addressee (2nd ps.)	
a. e.g. doctor to patient	"encouraging" *we*
b. adult to child	"coaxing" or "parental" *we*
c. adult to adult	"sarcastic" or "ironic" *we*
3. to a third person (e.g. reference by a secretary to a boss)	"reporting" *we*
4. to the speaker and addressee(s) (and possibly another or others)	"inclusive" *we* (in a book) "authorial" *we*, (in an organisation) "collective" *we*
5. to the speaker **and** another or others, but not the addressee	"exclusive" *we*
6. to the speaker **or** another or others (either addressee(s) or not)	"distributive" *we* (also possible in an organisation)
7. to a wider collectivity including the speaker	(universal statement) "generic" *we* (through a sense of belonging) "associative" *we*
8. to a sub-group in the collectivity with which the speaker wishes to be associated	"tribal" *we*

addressees are **not** participants in the actions described. A similar sense of association seems to be involved in the rhetoric of the American constitution, noted above, where modern Americans do associate themselves with the assertions of the founding fathers and, hence, become part of a wider collectivity. The generality of *we* in such cases can be limited by subordinate, specifying expressions, as in *we Europeans, we who have already filed our tax returns,* etc.)

4. connected with such a use is the "generic" one (p. 353) in which "people in general" (of course, including the speaker) are meant, as in the dictionary entries above. *We live in an age of change; Science tells us that…*
5. a "third person" use as when a secretary might say of the boss to another person, *We're in a bad mood today…*, i.e. the boss is in a bad mood today. Such a use may be close to the condescending or sarcastic uses noted earlier, but may be thought of as a "reporting" *we*, which could be interpreted as either warning or defensive in tone.
6. The "royal" *we*, which Quirk *et al*. (p. 353) declare to be "virtually obsolete".

The treatment of *we* by Quirk and his co-workers is fuller than in other contemporary works, but – as we have seen – it contains one or two questionable points and it does not allow for the idea of an "associative" *we*. Furthermore, the *Comprehensive Grammar*, like most treatments of the issue, sees the use of *we* as a first person plural as somehow "fundamental" with other uses as extensions or deviations. It also contains the implicit idea that the fundamental reference is to **both** the speaker **and** one or more others.

Of course, *we* is frequently used as a first person plural, but it also has first person singular, second person and third person uses.

The reference, even in a first person plural usage, may be – as we have seen – to others **not** including the speaker or addressees except by a sense of association. When a football fan tells us, *We won the cup in 1983*, or a Britisher who has never been a soldier tells us *We won the Falklands War*, the speakers are referring to the efforts of others, with whom they consider themselves associated. Perhaps, that is the "clan" or "tribal" *we*. Alan Ross famously identified the social distinction of "you and non-you". [or rather, U and non-U, for 'upper-class': ed., but point taken]. There seems to be a further socio-political distinction between "we and non-we", i.e. between those with whom we consider ourselves associated and those who

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are excluded. That tribal use is linked to the specification of *we*, mentioned above by Jespersen; *we British, we in the Monster Raving Loony Party, we supporters of Manchester United* excluding non-British, those outside the party, and those who support other clubs respectively. There is a connotation of implicit approval of those covered by *we* and disapproval of the non-*we*, which may have disturbing overtones.

Furthermore, there is a "distributive" *we*, in which the reference is not to **both** the speaker **and** other(s), but to **either** the speaker **or** other(s). This occurs in such expressions as *We will send you an application form* (i.e., either I will send it or some colleague will send it, but hardly both, although the colleague and I will cooperate in the matter). When one spouse says to another *We must pay the gas bill*, he or she means "either I must pay it or you must pay it", not "we both must pay it". But in *We went to the pictures*, both the speaker and the other(s) went.

We might summarise the uses of *we* in the table shown on page 5. ■

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A WAY WITH WORDS 2

Berries and blisters

[From Barry Newman, 'Black Currant is U.S.'s Forbidden Fruit', *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 Oct 02]

'HUDSON, New York – What is round, dark-purple, juicy and a "public nuisance," according to Title 13 Section 9 – 1303 of the Consolidated Laws of New York State?

The black currant.

'In New York, black currants are berries non grata. The law forbids the fruit. That is because black-currant bushes help spread blister rust, a fungus that kills white pine trees.'

Eastward Ho!

[From 'Special Report: Central Europe', *The Economist*, 26 Oct 02]

'… The EU's new Central European members will change Europe too. Redirecting at least some EU money from the continent's Atlantic and Mediterranean rim to its land-locked centre will alter not just Europe's memory of itself, but also its future look. For a start, the border of the so-called West will move east. Poland is already reinforcing its security in the primeval forests that green the border with Belarus and Ukraine, creating a new exclusionary line known, after its Eurocratic origins, as the Belgian curtain.'

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