Singular *they* and the syntax of townhouses*

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1. Introduction

Singular *they* in English, as in (1), presents a puzzle: It's semantically singular (e.g. *they* in (1) refers to *Kelly*) but morphosyntactically plural, as indicated by the agreement it controls.

(1) A: Hey, have you seen Kelly_1?
B: No, they_1 $\{\text{are}_{\text{pl}}/*\text{is}_{\text{sg}}\}$ late again.

This puzzle is acknowledged but not accounted for by extant analyses (Bjorkman 2017, Conrod 2019, Konnelly and Cowper 2020): They take singular *they* to be a morphosyntactically singular animate genderless pronoun, which accounts for its singular semantics, and derive the apparent plurality of *they* via underspecification of the exponent. As we argue in section 2, this type of analysis does not have a straightforward explanation for the morphosyntactically plurality of singular *they* evident in the agreement facts.

We argue instead that singular *they* belongs to a class of pronominal elements that we term *townhouse pronouns* (or simply, townhouses), all of which display similar mixed properties with respect to number and/or person. Other English townhouses are nurse *we*, royal *we*, and editorial *we* (Curme 1931:14–15, Joseph 1979, Collins and Postal 2012:217–224). The latter two are illustrated in the following examples:

(2) *Royal* we *is used by a sovereign to refer to themselves*
We $\{\text{are}_{\text{1st pl}}/*\text{am}_{\text{1st sg}}\}$ Queen Victoria. (*Blackadder's Christmas Carol*)

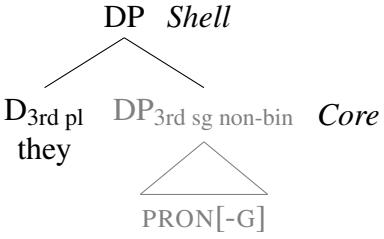
(3) *Editorial* we *refers to the author in a single-authored work*
We $\{\text{are}_{\text{pl}}/*\text{am}_{\text{sg}}\}$ the first author to disagree with this theory.

*We'd like to thank the audiences at Georgetown and NELS 55 for their valuable feedback, as well as Andy Murphy and Chun-Hung Shih for their judgments.

Other nominals with similar properties include imposters such as *your humble servant* (Collins and Postal 2012). We argue that townhouses have a distinct morphosyntax that sets them apart from these other nominals (see section 3).[1]

Our analysis is based on the insight that the puzzle with singular *they* and other townhouses has to do with pronouns and their structure, not with gender per se. Specifically, we propose in section 3 that townhouses have a bipartite structure with a pronominal D head and an elided prominal DP complement. Our account of singular *they* is the following:

(4)



Borrowing terminology from Collins and Postal 2012, we refer to the outer part of the structure (i.e. the higher D head and its projections) as the *shell* of the townhouse, and to the inner part as its *core*. These two parts of townhouses don't share (all) φ-features, which accounts for their characteristic mixed properties. In the case of singular *they*, the overt shell is morphosyntactically plural, and the elided core is morphosyntactically singular (evidence for both aspects of the analysis is given in section 4). An additional property of the core in this analysis of singular *they* is that it is an ineffable pronoun that is thus restricted to appear only in elliptical contexts, such as in the core of a townhouse (see section 5). This ineffable pronoun, which we refer to as PRON[-G] (for 'genderless pronoun') is animate and non-binary-gendered. This allows our analysis to preserve the insight from previous work on singular *they* that English has a pronoun with these features (Bjorkman 2017, Conrod 2019, Konnelly and Cowper 2020), except that it is not *they* itself, but PRON[-G].[2]

An important aspect of the analysis is that the DP complement of the shell head (the core) is elided, which makes the internal structure of townhouses similar to that of ordinary pronouns (Postal 1966, Elbourne 2001): Both involve a pronominal D head with an elided complement, the main difference being that this complement is itself a pronominal DP in townhouses, but an NP in ordinary pronouns. Evidence for this structural similarity between the two types of pronouns is offered in section 3.

Finally, we discuss restrictions on the inventory of townhouses in section 6, arguing that, to a great extent, they are due to a constraint to the effect that the φ-featural makeup of the core has to be a subset of the φ-featural makeup of the shell. To the extent that this is the correct account of these restrictions, it sheds light on the theory and representation of φ-features.

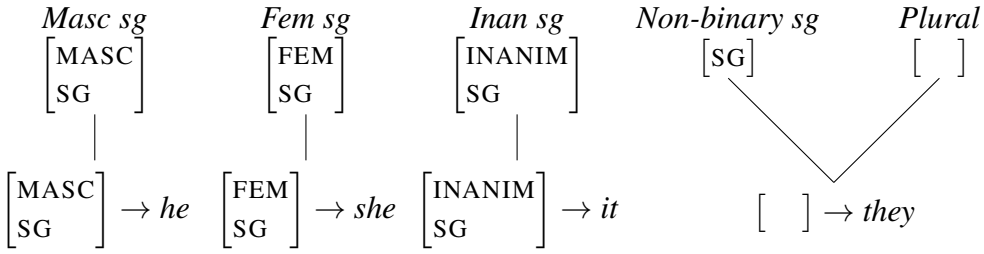
[1] Collins and Postal (2012:217–224) refer to townhouses as *pronominal imposters*. We prefer the term *townhouse (pronoun)*, as it more accurately reflects our syntactic analysis. We also like to avoid uninvited inferences that may arise from the use of *imposter* to refer to singular *they*.

[2] This paper focuses on non-binary uses of singular *they*, but see footnote 7 on ways to extend the analysis to account for other uses of this townhouse.

2. Singular *they* isn't just a singular pronoun that looks plural. It *is* plural.

Both Bjorkman 2017 and Konnelly and Cowper 2020 propose that singular *they* is a non-binary third-person singular pronoun contrasting with other singular pronouns of different gender (*he*, *she*, *it*) and with (genderless) plural *they*. The featural makeup of all these third person pronouns under this type of account is as represented in the top row in (5).

(5)



Within the framework of Distributed Morphology (Halle and Marantz 1993), they account for the syncretism between singular and plural *they* by underspecifying the vocabulary entry of this exponent for gender and number features, as represented in the bottom row in (5). Like the plural pronoun, but unlike the other singular pronouns, the singular non-binary pronoun doesn't have gender features. Accordingly, none of the gendered vocabulary entries in the bottom row in (5) are specified for a subset of the features of the plural and the non-binary singular pronouns, which are thus both realized by elsewhere *they*.

Without modification, the analysis predicts singular *they* should control the same agreement as other singular pronouns. This is not borne out, as shown in (1), repeated here:

(6) A: Hey, have you seen Kelly_1?
B: No, they_1 $\{\text{are}_{\text{pl}}/*\text{is}_{\text{sg}}\}$ late again.

A possible way to amend the analysis would be to reanalyze singular verbal agreement so that it is specific to agreement with nominals with gender features, given the representation of these features in (5). We do not think this is the correct solution, given that non-binary antecedents of singular *they* share its gender features, whatever they are, but trigger the same agreement as gendered singular pronouns:

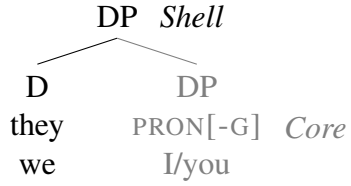
(7) Kelly_1 $\{\text{thinks}_{\text{sg}}/*\text{think}_{\text{pl}}\}$ they_1 $\{*\text{deserves}_{\text{sg}}/\text{deserve}_{\text{pl}}\}$ first place.

That is, singular agreement really is singular agreement, and the fact that singular *they* does not trigger it points to the conclusion that it is in some way morphosyntactically plural, unlike its antecedents. We thus contend that the apparent plurality of singular *they* is about pronominal structure, not exponence or gender features. The analysis presented in the following sections is a specific implementation of this hypothesis.

3. A pseudopronominal analysis of singular *they* and other townhouses

Our proposal for singular *they* and other townhouses, including editorial, royal, and nurse *we* can be represented as follows:

(8)



In this bipartite structure, the core is a pronominal DP whose φ-features match those of the antecedent. This core is the complement of the overt shell, which is itself also a pronominal DP, but whose φ-features are mismatched in some way with both the core and the antecedent. This section provides evidence for this bipartite structure, focusing on the pronominality of the two parts and the relation between the two.

In singular *they*, the shell and core DP are both third person, but they mismatch in number (plural and singular respectively). Other English townhouses include the following:

(9) *Editorial & royal* we *refer to the speaker/author*

a. [$_{DP}$ we$_{1st\ pl}$ [$_{DP}$ I$_{1st\ sg}$]]
b. We are in disagreement with Drs. Bjorkman, Conrod, Cowper, and Konnelly.
c. . . . and We do assure you, on a word of a prince, they shall be duly paid you.
(Queen Elizabeth I's speech against the Spanish Armada, 1588)

(10) *Nurse* we *refers to (a group containing) the hearer/addressee*

a. [$_{DP}$ we$_{1st\ pl}$ [$_{DP}$ you$_{2nd\ sg/pl}$]]
b. How are we feeling today?

While editorial and royal *we* have first person shells and cores and display the same number mismatch as singular *they*, nurse *we* has a first person plural shell and a second person singular or plural core.

This bipartite analysis of townhouses is reminiscent of Collins and Postal's (2012) account of imposters, illustrated in (11), but the two differ in important respects.

(11) a. **Your humble servant** finds the time before our next encounter very long.
b. You don't have **Nixon** to kick around anymore. (spoken by Nixon, 1962)

According to Collins and Postal (2012), imposters consist of an overt shell (*your humble servant* and *Nixon* in the examples above) that starts as part of an appositive clause modifying a covert core (*I*, *me*) whose φ-features match those of the antecedent. Their main argument for this appositive relation between the shell and the core comes from what they term *precursors* of imposters, which involve appositive structures:

(12) a. **I, your humble servant,** find the time before our next encounter very long.
b. You don't have **me, Nixon**, to kick around anymore.

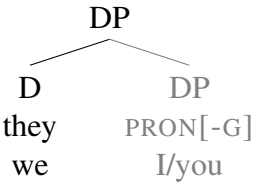
In contrast to imposters, townhouses do not have precursors in this sense:

(13) a. *I, we, disagree with Drs. Bjorkman, Conrod, Cowper, and Konnelly.
b. *I, We, do assure you, on a word of a prince, that they shall be duly paid you.
c. *How are you, we, feeling today?

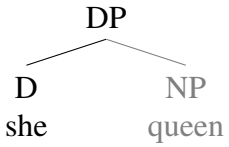
This is evidence that the relation between the shell and the core in townhouses is not one of apposition or modification, but of complementation, as represented in (8).

Our analysis instead likens townhouses to ordinary pronouns, under the hypothesis that the latter also have a bipartite structure headed by a pronominal D and an elided complement, as proposed by Elbourne (2001), developing ideas from Postal (1966) and Abney (1987). The main difference is in the category of the complement, as it is a (pronominal) DP in townhouses, but an NP in ordinary pronouns:

(14) *Townhouse pronouns*



(15) *Ordinary pronouns*



This structural parallel between ordinary pronouns and townhouses predicts that they have the same external syntax, contrasting with non-pronominal DPs.[3] Evidence for this aspect of the analysis comes from particle shift, illustrated in the following:

(16) a. Ghosts freak {them out/*out them}.
b. Ghosts freak {us out/*out us}.

(17) a. Ghosts freak {Kelly out/out Kelly}.
b. Ghosts freak {your humble servant out/out your humble servant}.

While particle shift is obligatory for *them* and *we* under both their ordinary pronoun and townhouse uses (16), it's optional for non-pronominal DPs, including imposters (17).[4]

[3]Similar to townhouses and imposters, Spanish polite *usted(es)* is notionally second person but morphosyntactically third person. It's normally described as a pronoun, which suggests a townhouse analysis with a third person pronominal shell over a second person core. However, Collins and Ordóñez (2021) propose a bipartite analysis in which the shell is crucially a *non-pronominal* DP whose head noun is *usted*. They provide several arguments for this aspect of the analysis, showing that *usted(es)* has the external syntax of a non-pronominal DP, in sharp contrast with our evidence that townhouses have the external syntax of pronominal DPs. Our conclusion from this is that not all pronoun-like elements have the same syntax, and that their status as pronouns or townhouses must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

[4]An interesting contrast between ordinary pronouns and towhouses is that only the former allow adnominal pronominal constructions (Postal 1966, Abney 1987), as seen, for instance, in the fact that *we patients* can

Finally, evidence for the pronominal status of the core in townhouses comes from the observation that, like ordinary pronouns, townhouses trigger Condition B (not C) effects:

(18) a. *Kelly$_1$ believes in them$_1$. (singular *they*)
b. Kelly$_1$ believes in their$_1$ friends.

(19) a. *Yours truly$_1$ will explain us$_1$ (=me) in a later section. (editorial *we*)
b. Yours truly$_1$ will explain our$_1$ (=my) reasoning in a later section.

We take this to be evidence for the pronominal status of the core, not the shell, since it's the core that has the referential index linked to the antecedent, which makes the shell invisible for Binding-Theoretic considerations.

4. Φ-features in both the shell and the core: Evidence from agreement

In this section, we argue that the agreement behavior of townhouses provides evidence for the claim that both the shell and the core have morphosyntactically active φ-features, which lends further support to our bipartite analysis.

Evidence for the φ-features of the shell comes from the fact that they control verbal agreement in subject townhouses:

(20) a. They {are$_{pl}$/*is$_{sg}$} late again. (singular *they*)
b. We {are$_{1st\ pl}$/*am$_{1st\ sg}$} in disagreement with Drs. Bjorkman, Conrod, Cowper, and Konnelly. (editorial *we*)
c. We {are$_{1st\ pl}$/*am$_{1st\ sg}$} Queen Victoria.
(royal *we*; *Blackadder's Christmas Carol*)

This is a straightforward Minimality effect: The φ-features of the shell are higher, and therefore closer to probing by T, than the φ-features of the core.

On the other hand, the φ-features of the core can be detected in clefts, based on the observation that clefted subjects in objective form (e.g. *me*, not *I*) uniformly trigger third-person agreement in the cleft, with matching number (Akmajian 1970:151ff., Ross 1970:251, Heck and Cuartero 2012:25–31, Douglas 2015):

(21) It's just me who {is / *am / *are} responsible.

Crucially, the φ-features that control agreement in clefted townhouse subjects are those of the core, not the shell:

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have an ordinary pronominal use referring to a group containing the speaker, but it does not have a nurse *we* use referring to a group containing the addressee and not the speaker. Under our analysis, ordinary pronouns and townhouses are different in terms of the category of the complement of the head D (NP vs. DP, respectively), but it remains to be seen whether this structural difference can account for their contrasting behavior in adnominal pronominal constructions, and if so, how.

(22) a. It's just them who {doesn't / *don't} need to be looked at. (singular *they*)
b. It's just them who {*doesn't / don't} need to be looked at. (plural *they*)

(23) a. It's just us who {is / ??are} in disagreement with Drs. Bjorkman, Conrod, Cowper, and Konnelly. (editorial *we*)
b. It's just us who {*is / are} in disagreement with Drs. Bjorkman, Conrod, Cowper, and Konnelly. (ordinary *we*)

(24) a. Is it just us who {doesn't / *don't} not need to be looked at? (nurse *we*)
b. Is it just us who {*doesn't / don't} not need to be looked at? (ordinary *we*)

The fact that the townhouses in these examples are notionally singular doesn't account for this pattern, as notionally singular but morphosyntically plural nominals such as pluralia tantum *scissors* trigger plural agreement in this context:

(25) It's just the scissors which {don't / *doesn't} need to be looked at.

Our conclusion is thus that townhouses have cores with morphosyntactically (not just notionally) active φ-features. Our tentative analysis of the agreement facts with clefted townhouses is that the controller of agreement in the cleft is the relative pronoun (*who*), whose antecedent is the singular core in the clefted townhouse. Whether this follows directly from our account of townhouses is a matter that we leave for future work.

5. PRON[-G] is an ineffable pronoun

In the previous section, we used agreement to motivate the existence of the morphosyntactically singular core DP PRON[-G] in singular *they*. But this raises a new question: Why, on the surface, do we usually see townhouse singular *they* (26a) instead of PRON[-G] (26b)?

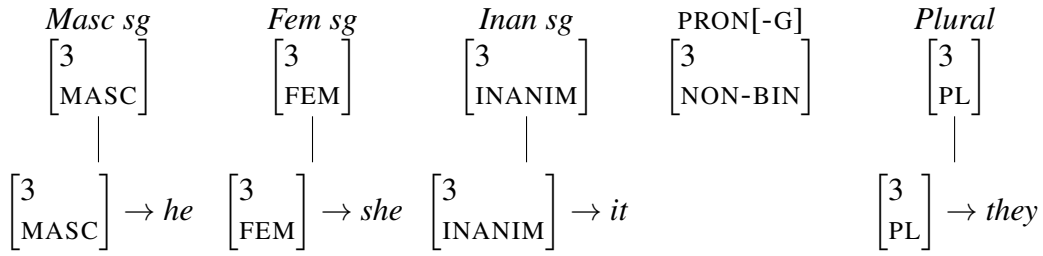
(26) a. Kelly$_1$ thinks they$_1$ deserve first place.
b. *Kelly$_1$ thinks PRON[-G]$_1$ deserves first place.

We propose that PRON[-G] is *ineffable*, which restricts it to covert contexts like the null complement of a townhouse structure (i.e. [$_{DP}$ *they* [$_{DP}$ PRON[-G]]]). In particular, we follow a line of literature (e.g. Kennedy and Merchant 2000, Arregi and Nevins 2014, and Mendes and Nevins 2022) which argues that ineffability results when there is no matching exponent in a realizational theory like Distributed Morphology. This entails the lack of a paradigmatic elsewhere form that can be inserted in all environments.

Consider once more how third person feature bundles are paired with exponents in English. As shown in (27), we propose that there is a distinct rule realizing each of the third masculine singular, third feminine singular, and third inanimate singular feature bundles. Additionally, the rule inserting *they* is specified for plural number, which prevents it from

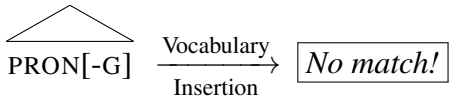
realizing PRON[-G].[5] In contrast to earlier analyses (cf. (5)), the rule inserting *they* is not an elsewhere item (*pace* Bjorkman 2017, Conrod 2019, and Konnelly and Cowper 2020).

(27)



Crucially, we contend that there is no rule which matches a subset of PRON[-G]'s features. Consequently, any attempt during Vocabulary Insertion to realize PRON[-G] will fail to find a match, inducing a crash at PF. This is shown in (28) for (26b).

(28) *Kelly$_1$ thinks $[\text{DP}_1\ [3, \text{NON-BIN}]]$ deserves first place.



By contrast, because pronominal D triggers ellipsis of its complement (Hewett 2023:sec. 6.2), ellipsis of the core DP will preempt Vocabulary Insertion at PRON[-G] in a singular *they* townhouse and circumvent a similar crash. The shell head bearing [3, PL] features, on the other hand, is straightforwardly realized as *they*.[6] This is shown in (29) for (26a).

(29) Kelly$_1$ thinks $[\text{DP}\ [\text{D}\ [3, \text{PL}]\ \text{they}]\ [\text{DP}_1\ [3, \text{NON-BIN}]\ [\text{PRON[-G]}]]]$ deserve first place.

⇒ *ellipsis of DP, no Vocabulary Insertion*

In summary, the ineffability of PRON[-G] reveals the need for a marked, plural representation of the structure matched by the rule inserting *they*. This converges with the evidence that the shell DP in singular *they* is morphosyntactically plural (see section 4).

[5]To make our analysis generalizable to uses of singular *they* with referents of unknown or non-specific gender (see Bjorkman 2017:esp. sec. 2), we tentatively propose the following interpretive rule for the [NON-BIN(ARY)] feature on PRON[-G]: [NON-BIN] is true if there is no binary masculine/feminine gender associated with the referent in the common ground.

[6]In section 6, we argue that the feature specification of the shell D head in singular *they* is richer, containing gender features. We assume that gender in plural pronouns is neutralized prior to exponence (see also Harley 2008:274–278, esp. 275 (30b)).

Moving beyond townhouse structures, our proposal that PRON[-G] is ineffable predicts that it should appear in other salvation-by-deletion contexts (i.a. Ross 1969, Lasnik 1995, Kennedy and Merchant 2000), such as *left-edge deletion* (e.g. Fitzpatrick 2006, Weir 2012). We submit that this prediction is, in fact, borne out. As the examples in (30a)–(30c) show, prosodically weak or unstressed elements like pronouns and auxiliaries can be deleted at the left edge of a sentence in spoken registers of English (deleted elements are struck through). Prosodically strong elements like the lexical verb *invited* can't be deleted (30d).

(30) a. Have you invited Kelly to the party yet?
b. ~~Have~~ you invited Kelly to the party yet?
c. ~~Have you~~ invited Kelly to the party yet?
d. *~~Have you invited~~ Kelly to the party yet?

As the name "left-edge deletion" indicates, the deleted material must be contiguous with the left edge of the sentence. Deleting only non-initial material, as in (31), is unacceptable.

(31) *Have ~~you~~ invited Kelly to the party yet?

Strikingly, PRON[-G] can be deleted in left-edge deletion sentences without occuring in a townhouse structure. Consider the question-answer pair in (32).

(32) Q Has Kelly$_1$ said if they$_1$'re coming to the party?
A Nope. ~~PRON[-G]$_T$~~ hasn't responded yet.

We can show that the missing subject in (32) must be PRON[-G]. First, the missing subject must be a third person singular pronoun and can't be townhouse singular *they*, since the auxiliary *has* that survives deletion bears singular, not plural, agreement. *They* controls plural agreement, even in left edge deletion contexts (33).

(33) A Nope. ~~They$_T$~~ haven't responded yet.

Second, the missing subject can't be *he*, *she*, or *it*, since (32) is not a case of misgendering. This means that the missing subject bears a [NON-BIN] feature. Finally, the missing subject can't be *Kelly*, since, as demonstrated in (30d), only prosodically weak elements like pronouns can delete in this construction. The only element which could have been deleted in (32), then, is PRON[-G].

The upshot of this discussion is that PRON[-G] is an ineffable, non-binary, third person singular pronoun, whose ineffability restricts it to occurring in salvation-by-deletion contexts like the core DP in a townhouse structure and left-edge deletion.

6. Restricting townhouses

Thus far, we have focused on deriving the properties of attested townhouses, including singular *they*, nurse *we*, editorial *we*, and royal *we*. But if townhouses could be freely gen-

erated by combining any pronominal core DP with any pronominal shell DP, we would massively overgenerate. To prevent this overgeneration, we propose the condition in (34).

(34) **Feature containment condition on townhouse pronouns**
In a townhouse pronoun structure, the φ-features of the core DP must be a subset of the φ-features of the shell D(P).

We show that (34) correctly restricts the inventory of possible townhouses, shedding light on the representation of φ-features (in English), specifically number, gender, and person.

Regarding number, townhouses abide by the restriction in (35).

(35) A plural shell can have a singular core, but a singular shell can't have a plural core.

While plural townhouses can have singular reference, as with singular *they* (36a) and royal *we* (37a), singular pronouns can never refer to a group; compare (36b) and (37b).

(36) a. Kelly$_1$ thinks [$_{DP}$ they$_{pl}$ [$_{DP_1}$ PRON[-G]$_{sg}$]] deserve first place. (singular *they*)
b. *The girls$_1$ think [$_{DP}$ she$_{sg}$ [$_{DP_1}$ they$_{pl}$]] deserves first place.

(37) a. [$_{DP}$ We$_{pl}$ [$_{DP}$ I$_{sg}$]] are Queen Victoria. (royal *we*)
b. *[$_{DP}$ I$_{sg}$ [$_{DP}$ we$_{pl}$]] am Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

This is explained by feature containment (34) if number is represented with a privative [PL] feature, so that singular ([ ]) is a subset of plural ([PL]) but not vice versa:

(38) DP are Queen Victoria.

D	DP	⇒ *satisfies*
[PL]	[ ]	*feature containment*
we	I	

(39) * DP am Queen V. & Prince A.

D	DP	⇒ *doesn't satisfy*
[ ]	[PL]	*feature containment*
I	we	

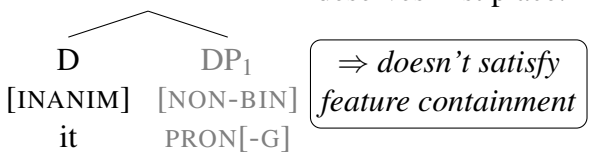
Turning next to gender in townhouses, the attested combinations are extremely limited:

(40) A third person singular shell can't have a third person core of a different gender.

Example (41) is representative of this generalization: Inanimate *it* can't head a townhouse with a non-binary PRON[-G] core.

(41) *Kelly$_1$ thinks [$_{DP}$ it$_{inanim}$ [$_{DP_1}$ PRON[-G]$_{non\text{-}bin}$]] deserves first place.

More generally, it is not possible to use a third singular pronoun to refer to a third person of a different gender. In terms of feature containment (34), we interpret this finding as indicating that English has four marked genders, which we represent privatively: [MASC] vs. [FEM] vs. [INANIM] vs. [NON-BIN] (see also (27)). On our analysis, (41) is unacceptable because the gender features of PRON[-G] are not a subset of the gender features of *it*:

(42) *Kelly$_1$ thinks 

deserves first place.

By contrast, third plural pronouns, like the shell in singular *they*, must have gender features: [$_{DP}$ they$_{[NON\text{-}BIN,\ PL]}$ [$_{DP}$ PRON[-G]$_{[NON\text{-}BIN]}$]]. A genderless shell would wrongly be ruled out by feature containment.[7]

Finally, consider person in townhouses. We begin with combinations of participant pronouns. To a first approximation, the contrast in (43) suggests that a first person shell can have a second person core but that a second person shell can't have a first person core.

(43) a. [$_{DP}$ We$_{1st}$ [$_{DP}$ you$_{2nd}$]] need to be patient. (nurse *we*)
b. *[$_{DP}$ You$_{2nd}$ [$_{DP}$ I$_{1st}$/we$_{1st}$]] need to be patient.

However, participant townhouses in languages whose pronouns inflect for clusivity reveal a more complex interaction. In Taiwanese, 'phone' *we*, which refers to the addressee, is necessarily first inclusive (see Collins and Postal 2012:255, n. 1, citing Arthur Wang, p.c.).

(44) [Context: Asking who the caller is on a phone call.]
{Lí / Lán / *Gún} tówī?
{2SG / 1PL.INCL / *1PL.EXCL} where
'Who are you?' (Taiwanese; Chun-Hung Shih, p.c.)

Adopting a townhouse analysis for Taiwanese 'phone' *we*, we conclude that only first inclusive shells can have a second person core—a conclusion that we extend to nurse *we* in English. The upshot is that English has a clusivity distinction featurally, even if it's neutralized by exponence. Our revised asymmetries for participant features are as follows:

[7] Without saying anything else, our analysis predicts that the core DP in a singular *they* townhouse could be any singular pronoun. But this is overly permissive: Singular *they* can't refer to an inanimate (e.g. *This table$_1$ has a stain on {it$_1$ / *them$_1$}*; see Bjorkman 2017). Thus, [$_{DP}$ *they*$_{[INANIM,\ PL]}$ [$_{DP}$ *it*$_{[INANIM]}$]] must not be a possible townhouse in English. We contend that this restriction is derivable from lexically specified c-selectional properties of D heads: In English, [$_{D}$ π–3, INANIM, PL] does not c-select DP (see examples (48)–(49) for our representation of person features).

This leaves open the possibility that a singular *they* shell could combine with a (gender-matching) masculine or feminine singular core DP. Such combinations appear to be possible: Singular *they* can have a quantified antecedent containing a lexically gendered noun (e.g. *No boy$_1$ thinks they$_1$ deserve first place*) and, for certain speakers described by Konnelly and Cowper (2020) (their *Stage 3*), singular *they* can have a third person antecedent of any gender, as in (i).

(i) %Your mother$_1$ said [$_{DP}$ they$_{[\{FEM,\ MASC,\ NON\text{-}BIN\},\ PL]}$ [$_{DP_1}$ {she$_{[FEM]}$, he$_{[MASC]}$, PRON[-G]$_{[NON\text{-}BIN]}$}]] left something here.
(*Your mother* refers to an individual of any gender, binary or not, which may or may not be known to the speaker and/or the hearer.) (adapted from Konnelly and Cowper 2020:15, (26b)

(45) A first inclusive shell, but not a first exclusive shell, can have a second core.

a. [DP We$_{1stIn}$ [DP you$_{2nd}$]] need to be patient. (nurse *we*)
b. *[DP We$_{1stEx}$ [DP you$_{2nd}$]] need to be patient. (nurse *we*)

(46) A second shell can't have a first inclusive/exclusive core.

a. *[DP You$_{2nd}$ [DP I$_{1stEx}$/we$_{1stEx/In}$]] need to be patient.

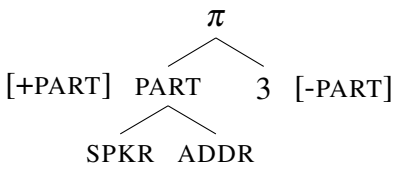
We also conjecture that a first inclusive shell can have a first exclusive core, but not vice versa. We leave testing this prediction for future work. Lastly, while combinations of non-pariticpants are possible in townhouses (e.g. (36a)), participant and non-participant pronouns never mix:[8]

(47) Neither can a participant shell have a third core nor vice versa.

a. *[DP I$_{1stEx}$/we$_{1stEx/In}$/you$_{2nd}$ [DP he$_{3rd}$/she$_{3rd}$/it$_{3rd}$/PRON[-G]$_{3rd}$/they$_{3rd}$]] do.
b. *[DP He$_{3rd}$/she$_{3rd}$/it$_{3rd}$/they$_{3rd}$ [DP I$_{1stEx}$/we$_{1stEx/In}$/you$_{2nd}$]] do(es).

We can explain the near total incompatibility of persons in townhouses via feature containment (34) with marked representations for 3rd, Participant, Speaker, and Addressee, while leaving 1stEx and 2nd as subsets of 1stIn. The following feature geometries achieve this:

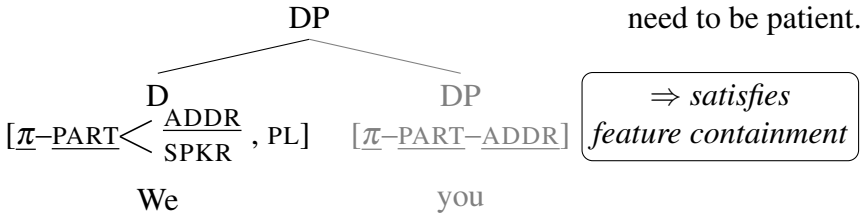
(48)



(49) a. 1stIn: [π–PART⟨ADDR, SPKR⟩]
b. 1stEx: [π–PART–SPKR]
c. 2nd: [π–PART–ADDR]
d. 3rd: [π–3]

As an illustration, nurse *we* (45a) is acceptable because the features of the core are a subset of the features of the shel:

(50)



need to be patient. (nurse *we*)

Reversing the core and shell as in (46a) will violate feature containment and thereby crash.

In summary, feature containment (34) correctly restricts the inventory of townhouses in English when paired with the following proposals. First, third person is morphologically specified, not radically underspecified (Nevins 2007, Bondarenko 2020, Grishin 2023, a.o.; *pace* e.g. Harley and Ritter 2002). Second, number is privative ([PL] vs. [ ]), while person is (in part) binary ([±PART]); see Nevins 2011. Third, English has four marked genders.

[8] We analyze this as a result of conflicting person, though it could also be due to a clash in gender.

7. Conclusion

Singular *they* belongs to a class of pronouns we have termed *townhouses* that, descriptively, display a mismatch in morphosyntactic vs. notional φ-features. Our account of townhouses is that they involve a bipartite structure headed by an overt pronominal shell whose complement (the core) is also a pronominal DP. In the case of singular *they*, the core is the non-masculine, non-feminine third person singular pronoun PRON[-G], whose distribution is restricted by its ineffability. The two DPs in a townhouse have potentially mismatching φ-features that are morphosyntactically active, as diagnosed by verbal agreement in different syntactic contexts. Several aspects of the analysis are specific to townhouses, and set them apart from other nominals that, on the surface, display similar φ-featural mismatches (see the discussion on this point in section 3, including footnote 3). The combination of these shell and core φ-features in a townhouse is constrained by a feature containment condition that goes a long way in accounting for the reduced size of the inventory of townhouses available in English (see also footnote 7 on ways to further restrict this inventory).

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