These are the pronouns that we use them but we don’t like them.

Andrea Beltrama
University of Chicago
andremormora@uchicago.edu
April 23, 2013

1 Introduction

Resumptive pronouns (henceforth RPs) represent a nightmarish, yet dreamlike case study for linguists engaged in theoretical and experimental syntax. From a descriptive standpoint, these expressions can be defined as “pronouns which appear in a position in which, under other circumstances, a gap would appear” (McCloskey (2006), p. 26). An example for English is reported below as (1). ¹

(1) a. This is the girl that John likes __ (Gap)
   b. This is the girl that John likes her. (RP)

Almost every effort to propose an analysis of their distribution and licensing mechanism has stumbled into a seemingly unsurmountable paradox. On the one hand, RPs are systematically “rejected” by speakers asked to provide explicit acceptability judgments on sentences containing them. On the other hand, RPs are often produced in spoken language, to the point that their occurrence is far too systematic to be explained away as a speech error. Such inconsistency has sparked a long and heated debate on the actual nature of these elements, as linguists keep arguing for different analysis without managing to provide a satisfactory explanation to the problem.

¹This paper is exclusively concerned with resumptives of the intrusive kind, as defined in Sells (1984). Fully grammatical instances of resumption, such as those in Irish, Hebrew, Arabic and Swedish, are to be considered outside the scope of the discussion
Traditionally, a solution to this puzzle has been to suggest that RPs are *processing artifacts* (Asudeh (2012), that is, extra-grammatical expressions that can nevertheless facilitate language production. However, such explanation has been repeatedly questioned by experimental studies, and hardly provides an exhaustive answer to the problem (see 2.2). A crucial piece of this already complicated puzzle is that RPs have been frequently claimed to be substandard, ultimately stigmatized forms (see 3), even though no author has ever undertaken a thorough investigation of their social meaning.

In this paper I will argue that theoretical and experimental syntax would ultimately benefit from taking into consideration the indexical value of resumptive pronouns. Such integration of perspectives could yield promising results from two different points of view. First, it could allow for a better understanding of how processes of sociolinguistic evaluation interact with language comprehension and language processing. Second, it could reveal an unforeseen interaction between the “peripheral” syntactic status of certain forms - just like the one of RPs - and the semiotic processes through which these forms become enregistered in socially meaningful registers.

2 The speaker/listener paradox

The most puzzling feature of resumption is that it appears to be a markedly *production-oriented* phenomenon. Both anecdotal observations (Eby et al. (2012)) and more systematic corpus-based studies (Prince (1990) and Bennett (2008) show that RPs are extensively used in speech. However, in spite of their frequent use, they are systematically disliked by speakers when it comes to assess the acceptability of sentences, a task that constitutes a common practice of data collection in linguistics. Even more interestingly, RPs appear to be regularly rejected even by the same speakers that produced them, as shown by (Ferreira and Swets (2005)) in an experimental study combining a production and a comprehension part.

Unsurprisingly, this discrepancy between spontaneous speech and acceptability perception has been regarded as heavily problematic in syntax, especially if one considers that, within this branch of linguistics, acceptability judgments constitute perhaps the most widely used measure of assessment to determine the *status* of a certain construction. Crucially, acceptability is explicitly distinguished from *grammaticality*. While the latter is thought to merely indicate whether a construction can be generated by the grammatical system of a certain language, the former is generally taken to indicate whether listeners “could could imagine themselves choosing to use this construction (Eby et al. (2012))”. As such, acceptability is thought to be a much better suited measure to gauge the status of constructions that are not licensed by the grammar, but are nevertheless frequently and commonly used in speech. In brief, acceptability judgments should be able to mirror the
actual speakers’ behavior in a way in which grammaticality ones can’t. It is precisely the fact that resumptives do not align with this prediction that causes the controversy, and the related paradox.

2.1 Resumptives as grammatical outcasts

A fairly popular way in which this puzzle has been tackled in the theoretical literature has been to treat intrusive RPs as processing *artifacts* (Asudeh (2012)). According to this idea, which has been repeatedly proposed over the past forty years in different variants (Kroch (1981),Prince (1990),Erteschik-Shir (1992),Asudeh (2004) a.o.), RPs are devices that are *not* licensed by the grammar, but can nevertheless facilitate language production in situations that present a processing challenge for the speaker. Typically, such challenge arises when the sentence that the speaker is trying to produce contains either a grave syntactic violation or a level of internal complexity that jeopardize its interpretability. The textbook examples for these two situations are *island violations* (Ross (1967)\(^2\), reported in (2)) and dependencies with a considerable amount of nested embeddings (in (3)). According to this view, in these environments resumptive pronouns can be seen as a “lesser evil” with respect to gaps. Their job is to spare the speaker from the burden of producing an exceedingly flawed and/or convoluted sentence (as those in (2b) and (3b), ensuring that the final result will be at least a somewhat understandable and coherent, though not fully grammatical, sentence. In (2b), for instance, the island prevents “the linguist” from being interpreted as a filler of the gap, and as a consequence the gap is perceived as an illicitly missing argument for the verb “works for”. In (2a), instead, the presence of *her* at least ensures that the verb does have an explicit argument, even though, because of an illicit extraction, the sentence as a whole is not grammatical. The symbol ≫ indicates that the sentence above has a somewhat better status than the sentence below.

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\(^2\)As first shown by Ross 1967, *islands* are configurations from which extraction of a constituent is not allowed. If the constituent is extracted, the result will be an ungrammatical sentence. Two showcase examples are complex NP islands (they ban extraction from a complex NP constituent) and relative clause islands (they ban extraction from relative clauses).

(1)  
   a. *This is the hat that I believe the claim that Bob tried to wear ___.* (NP island)  
   b. *This is the hat that the man who tried to wear ___ is 67 years old.* (Relative clause island)

Other typical islands types are adjuncts and coordinated clauses. Islands are one of the most controversial and widely investigated topics in syntax, and are by no means a homogenous category. For instance, there is consensus on the fact that they are not all equally strong, and that they can be “repaired” under certain circumstances such as ellipsis (J.Merchant (2001)). Some authors questioned their very existence, suggesting that they are merely processing artifacts (Hofmeister and Sag (2001)).
2. According to this idea, resumptives have a hybrid nature within the landscape of generative grammar. On the one hand they are “outcasts” of the grammar proper, as they are not generated by the basic principles that, instead, license fully grammatical transformations like, for instance, auxiliary inversion, movement, ellipsis. On the other hand, they can work as facilitators in language production to make the “best out of a bad sentence” (Prince (1990), p. 95)³, rescuing the speaker from the danger of getting stuck.

2.2 Not just outcasts. Unacceptable outcasts

Crucially, accounts like these lines should make a clear prediction: in terms of acceptability, RPs should sound less outrageous in environments that already contain some kind of syntactic violation. In other words, the more flawed and hard to interpret a sentence is - and sentences as those in (2) and (3) are prototypical instances of this - the less unacceptable

³An example of how such a device would work in detail is provided by Kroch, who argues that resumption can be used to fix errors due to poor planning in oral discourse. The assumption behind this claim is that language production is largely incremental, with little room for advanced planning: the utterance starts being assembled before its syntactic planning is complete. A wh-island violation like the one in (1a) occurs when, after “extracting” an element (here, “the guy”), the sentence continues in a way that is not compatible with having an extracted element. Crucially, since production is incremental, the production device in the speaker’s brain does not realize that extracting “the guy” causes a violation until it is already midway through the sentence. At that point, the only way out to get out of trouble without disrupting fluency is to insert an RP to amnesty the violation and ensure the delivery of an interpretable, though ill-formed, message. Failing to insert a resumptive would generate an even worse sentence (in (1b)), in which a violation due to a missing subject adds up to the violation of extracting “the guy” out of an embedded question. The final result is a sentence like (1a), which is “ungrammatical but interpretable, and will seem reasonably acceptable compared to its alternant with a gap (in (1b)), which is not only ungrammatical, but also uninterpretable” (p.133).
a RP should sound there. This is because such environments maximize the practical benefits of RPs in a way in which a “normal”, well-formed and reasonably simple sentence does not. Assuming that acceptability scores really measure the extent to which speakers would imagine themselves as using a certain construction, resumption should receive higher judgments whenever its effects come more handy for the speaker.

With this hypothesis in mind, a number of authors (Ferreira and Swets (2005), Alexopoulou and Keller (2007), Heestand et al. (2011), Eby et al. (2012), Han et al. (2012)) engaged in laboratory studies with the aim of testing whether such difference in acceptability would emerge. Various kinds of sentential contexts and various technique of presentation were adopted. For instance, Eby et al. (2012) and Han et al. (2012) tried to present the stimuli auditorily, in an attempt to reproduce resumption in an environment as similar as possible as oral speech. Moreover, Heestand et al. (2011) forced tried to reproduce a “challenging” situation by forcing the participants to express their acceptability judgments within 400 ms from the presentation of the sentence. In spite of these more or less careful attempts to control for multiple contextual factors, however, the vast majority of these studies yielded a null result, as RPs repeatedly turned out to be dispreferred across the board, regardless of the presence of island violations or multiple embeddings, and regardless of the modality of presentation and the presence of a time constraints. Needless to say, such results pose a serious challenge to the theories of intrusive resumption outlined above, and basically reinforce the paradox that they were attempting to solve, bringing the debate back to its starting point. In a telling presentation (see below), Eby et al. (2012) go as far as suggesting that the current state of investigation on resumption features a deep rift between the intuition of linguists and those of naive speakers, which should be the actual source of data for the scholars. 50 years after the first attempts to cast light on the phenomenon of resumption, very little progress has been made. Figure 1 and 2 summarize how Eby et al. (2012) summarized the issue in their presentation.
## Competing Perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linguists</th>
<th>Naïve speakers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• RPs are used in A’-dependencies when movement is impossible</td>
<td>• RPs are used most frequently when gaps are grammatical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• RPs are better than gaps in illicit extraction sites</td>
<td>• Mostly RPs as bad or worse than gaps</td>
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<tr>
<td>• RPs facilitate listener comprehension</td>
<td>• Inconclusive evidence</td>
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Figure 1: The paradox, part 1. From Eby et al. (2012)

## The Problem

**People don’t like RPs**
- Quantitative methods fail to replicate the contrast reported in the theoretical literature
- RPs are rated as bad as gaps in islands and/or poorly across the board (Ferreira & Swets 2005, Alexopoulou & Keller 2007, Heestand et al. 2011, Han et al. 2012)
- RPs are rejected faster than gaps (Dickey 1996, Heestand et al. 2011) suggesting they are not just bad, but obviously bad

**But they still use them**

Figure 2: The paradox, part 2. From Eby et al. (2012)

### 3 Resumptives as enregistered forms

A striking feature of these studies is that - while not methodologically identical - they all ignore the fact that resumptive pronouns appear to be syntactic variants with an important
value as indexical features. While a thorough sociolinguistic investigation on the topic has not been carried out yet, various linguists noted in passing that these expressions can be seen as sociolinguistically relevant variants, often associated with substandard registers. For instance, regarding English, Ross (1967) suggested that “resumptives are common in everyone’s speech, but are regarded as substandard by normative grammarians” (p.434). Kroch (1981) observed that they are common in “colloquial English” (p.125), Cann et al. (2005) pointed out that they are “marginal constructions”. Similar comments have been made by authors engaged in the syntax of resumptives in Italian, a language in which the distribution of these expressions seem to be comparable with the facts observed for English (Belletti (2006) and Utzeri (2007)). In addition, spontaneous comments from subjects in a psycholinguistics experiment that I carried out on Italian (Beltrama and Xiang (2013)) the study was not meant to investigate social meaning) provided a more colorful and insightful window into the actual social perception of the use of such expressions. One participant commented that sentences containing RPs reminded her of “how the janitor in her condo would speak”. Another speaker noticed that “People who speak like that sound completely uneducated or ignorant, but yes, we can understand what they are saying ”. Bringing all these observations together, it seems pretty clear that the gap/resumption alternation is by no means neutral in terms of social indexicality. Resumptives appear to be “socially enregistered as indexical of speaker attributes (Agha (2005)), and as such they are attached to a potentially rich configuration of social meaning which still needs to be fully discovered and articulated.

While a satisfactory and nontrivial analysis of the social indexicality of these forms would go well beyond the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note that this aspect has been completely ignored in all the studies discussed above, in spite of its prominence. To be fair, this hardly comes as a surprise. While in disciplines like phonology and phonetics the integration of the linguistic and social dimension has yielded fruitful results, syntactic investigations have always been looking at language as an independent system, at best incorporating speakers as disembodied “parsers” or “processors” (the account of resumptives as processing artifacts provides a relevant example of this). As a consequence, syntactic variation and its social meaning have been largely ignored, or just dismissed as sources of interference to be filtered out.

One one hand, this methodological stance can be understood in light of syntacticians’ explicit goal to focus on language as an abstract system of underlying rules. On the other, it is clear that, in a case like resumption, the sociolinguistic component plays an active role in determining the outcome of the very experimental tasks that these scholars rely upon to fulfil their research agenda. In light of this, and obviously in light of the current impasse in which research on the topic is stuck, leaving such component aside does not appear to be a desirable solution.
On a practical level, it is hard to exclude the hypothesis that the social indexical value attached to RPs, whatever it might be, was taken in consideration by speakers called to assess the acceptability of sentences. As mentioned earlier in the paper, acceptability is generally taken to indicate whether listeners “could imagine themselves choosing to use a particular construction (Eby et al. (2012))”. But if this is really the case, an acceptability judgment on any linguistic construction becomes highly sensitive to the indexical value that such construction has in a community. To put it bluntly, it would be hard to conceive a scenario in which a participant can admit to imagine himself using a particular expression when such expression is marked as substandard or even stigmatized. In this perspective, it becomes clear that this line of syntactic research has largely failed to recognize that elicited judgments are loaded with explicit and implicit articulations of metalinguistic beliefs (Tremblay (2005), Schtze (1996) cited in Squires (2013).

On a more general level, abstracting away from the social meaning of the syntactic construction under investigation could also lead to miss some important empirical facts about language processing in general. While social meaning has generally been considered completely unrelated to syntactic structure and parsing, there is growing evidence (in particular, Squires (2013)) that, at least in particular cases, these two components are closely related. In this sense, RPs could be an ideal case study to assess in a more precise way the relationship between sociolinguistically relevant syntactic variation and language processing, in the attempt to “connect the low-level linguistic determination of form to the higher-level social evaluation of those forms.” (Squires 2013).

4 Where to next? The grammatical status of enregistered forms

Besides helping linguists to critically re-consider the nature and the implications of acceptability judgments, a systematic investigation of the social meaning of resumptives could also allow to cast light on a relatively unexplored aspect of language variation and social indexicality: the relation between the grammatical status of certain linguistic forms, and their relevance as $n+1$-th-order indexical (Silverstein (2003) or markers/stereotypes Labov (1972)). What I suggest is that there might be a deep, previously unforeseen connection between the “liminal” syntactic status of such forms - i.e., the nature of resumptives as outcasts of the grammar - and the likelihood for them to be recruited as socially meaningful indexicals that become associated with a style of speech and a set of more or less explicit metapragmatic beliefs - i.e. the comments provided by participants and the common perceptions of linguists reported in section 3.

The idea that grammar-internal mechanisms could be somehow related to the construction and re-creation of social meaning is by no means new, although it has rarely been pursued systematically within linguistics. In her influential formalization of ex-
emplar model theories, Pierrehumbert (2002) argued that social/episodic information is cognitively stored alongside lexical/grammatical information and is as systematically relied upon as the latter, according to a holistic model - as opposed to a modular one - of language processing. More specifically, in two separate studies on copula deletion and the modal *finna* in African American English, Bender (2000) and Thomas (2013) suggest that, for an ethnolectal variable, “variants are more strongly associated with their social values when they occur in more marked grammatical environments”. (Thomas (2013), slide 7).

For instance, Bender shows with a perception experiment that using a zero copula form before a noun (a more marked grammatical environment) presupposes an amplified social meaning than using a zero copula form before a verb (a less marked grammatical environment). Besides syntactic properties, the semantic distribution of a form can interact with its perceived social meaning. Horn (personal communication) notes that the so called “generational so” in English (e.g. in a sentence like “I’m *so* doing this”) tends to be strongly perceived as “youthful” and “slangy” whenever it occurs together with nouns/verbs that do not have gradable denotations, violating the selectional restrictions that normally govern the distribution of the intensifiers.

While these observations represent an important and promising attempt to unpack the connection between the grammatical and the indexical components of linguistic forms, they do not, nor they intended to, get to the finer-grained shades of the indexical meaning of these variants. Moreover, they still retain the aura of “sporadic”, unconventional scientific enterprises in scientific context in which the grammatical and the social component of language have been treated as separate and mutually exclusive. However, they do provide an example of how these two aspects could be fruitfully integrated. I hypothesize that, within sociolinguistically relevant syntactic variants, those forms that stand out as salient indexicals most likely also stand out as “marked” forms within the grammatical system, be that because they are not licensed by the grammar (such as RPs), they are particularly infrequent (such as zero copulas before verbs) or they cause semantic type-mismatched (such as intensifiers used with non gradable predicates). At this point, we have nothing but a scattered sets of examples. In order to test this hypothesis in a reliable way, a more systematic investigations of indexicals and their grammatical status must be carried out. Due to their double nature as grammatically marginal and indexically relevant forms, resumptive pronouns could represent an ideal case study to carry out this project, as they offer a privileged window to take a first look at the relationship between indexicality and grammar.

In conclusion, pursuing this enterprise could have desirable consequences not only for the methodological awareness of syntacticians engaged with indexically meaningful variants, but also for the study of indexicality itself. Considering where these forms are positioned in the grammar could open up a new dimension for understanding how index-
icals ultimately circulate and work, together with the well-established practice to analyze the semiotic processes by which they become enregistered and the ideological fields in which their value is negotiated. The fact that this integration of “linguistic” and “social” aspects has been more successfully achieved in phonology and (socio)phonetics seems to leave room for the hope that a similar project could be successfully carried out with respect to syntactic variation, which has generally received far less attention in linguistics and linguistic anthropology.

From this perspective, null experimental results, with which the history of the investigation on resumption is replete, could acquire an unforeseen relevance. In a personal meeting, while commenting on Heestand et al. (2011)’s experiment, Jason Merchant (personal communication) pointed out that “of course no effects of resumption were found. Their subject population was entirely composed of Harvard undergrads. How could they possibly admit to like resumptives?” What was thought to be a weakness of the experimental design, however, could more simply be seen as an important window to cast light on the (presumably complex) interplay between syntactic representations and metapragmatic beliefs.

References


