

# Modified pronouns and split agreement: the syntax of virtual performatives\*

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## 1. Introduction

Virtual performatives (also known as the bounding asterisk construction: e.g. *\*jumps in excitement\**, *\*sings myself happy birthday\**) are widely used in web-based electronic written communication (instant messaging, text messaging, mobile interactive multimodal platforms, discussion boards, social networking sites and microblogging sites, see Virtanen 2020:4-5 and references); and, to a lesser extent, in comics (print as well as electronic, Zimmer 2013). While the pragmatics of the construction has attracted considerable attention (see Virtanen 2020 and references), to the best of my knowledge, no formal syntactic or semantic analysis has been offered so far. In my paper, I argue that virtual performatives are full, non-truncated clauses, and their special behaviour is due to two factors: i) their subjects are first person singular personal pronouns modified by an adjectival temporal expression and ii) they are unspecified for tense. These two factors conspire and lead to the unique characteristics of the construction: the silent subject and the split agreement phenomena. Similar constructions have been reported in other languages such as French (Dias da Silva 2015) or Polish (Lyons 2018) as well; here, I will limit the discussion to English.

## 2. Use and interpretation

Virtual performatives are limited to written communication. Typographically, they are typically (but not necessarily) surrounded by parenthetical \*s (all examples of virtual performatives are from Virtanen 2015 and 2020 unless otherwise noted):

- (1) a. *\*sobs\**
- b. *::nods head::*
- c. *\*blows smoke rings*

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- d. *sees something that would be nice to buy for a gf but doesnt have a gf.  
positive side is im saving \$\$ 😊*

The subject is obligatorily silent and it is obligatorily interpreted as 1SG, whereas the time is taken to be the immediate present. The illocutionary force has been argued to be performative (hence the name virtual performatives, coined by Virtanen 2020):

- (2) *\*blows smoke rings\**  
*They call me Trouble.*

The first line of (2) is a virtual performative, and the second is a sentence uttered (typed) by the speaker (author): the hearer (reader) is invited to imagine that the speaker blows smoke rings simultaneously with uttering the sentence ‘They call me Trouble.’ Contemporaneity with the utterance and performativity are strong tendencies but not strict requirements (*pace* Virtanen 2020), as shown by the examples below:

- (3) a. *\*studies for 10 minutes\* \*rests and scrolls on twitter for 3 hours\**  
b. *\*hates it when people ignore me\**

The event described by first part of (3a) extends beyond utterance time and the event described by second part of (3a) does not even include utterance time. (3b) is a non-episodic, generic statement. Based on such observations, I argue that virtual performatives are underspecified in terms of relative time and illocutionary force, and it is up to the hearer to infer what the intended tense and illocutionary force might be. In the absence of any strong contextual clues to the contrary, the default assumption is that the tense is the immediate present and the illocutionary force is performative.

### 3. 1SG/3SG split agreement

Strikingly, in virtual performatives, we observe 3SG agreement on the verb (indicated by an obligatory *-s* suffix), even though the silent subject is 1SG. At the same time, binding and co-reference phenomena show obligatory 1SG agreement ((4c) also illustrates the fact that virtual performatives can have tensed clausal objects<sup>1</sup>):

- (4) a. *\*sings myself happy birthday\**  
b. *\*retweets my own tweet\**  
c. *\*forgets that I have to be up at 7\* \*remembers that I don't care and stays up anyway\**  
d. *\*runs to bathroom to admire my new stunning self\**

Virtanen (2020) notices the pattern in (4c) and offers a pragmatic account: whereas the fact the we observe 3SG verbal agreement in the main clause of a virtual performative

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<sup>1</sup> In virtual performatives, subordinated clauses are either tensed clauses or small clauses, but they can never be virtual performatives: virtual performatives are restricted to root clauses. Consider:

- (i) ungrammatical: *\*forgets that has to be up at 7\**  
ungrammatical: *\*remembers that doesn't care and stays up anyway\**

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supposedly reflects an 'externaliz[ation] of the virtual self', the emergence of 1SG in the subordinate clause is an act of 'reassuming the virtual self'. While such a pragmatic shift between perspectives may be possible, I argue it is an inadequate explanation of the observed data. If this were indeed a shift between persons as a mere pragmatic device then surely we would expect it to be optional or at least easily violable. Yet, the overt subject in complement clauses is strictly 1SG. Also, the assumption that virtual performatives have a 3SG covert subject is itself questionable: while the verb does exhibit 3SG agreement morphology, clausemate possessive pronouns and reflexives coreferential with the silent subject are obligatorily 1SG.

The availability of reflexives (5a) and especially of controlled PRO subjects (5b) and objects and of subject depictives (5c) indicates that the virtual performative has a syntactically active silent subject:

- (5) a. \* $\emptyset_i$  sings myself<sub>i</sub> happy birthday\*  
b. \* $\emptyset_i$  runs to bathroom PRO<sub>i</sub> to admire my new stunning self\*  
c. \* $\emptyset_i$  goes to sleep extremely late...  $\emptyset_i$  wakes up exhausted and  $\emptyset_i$  is tired throughout the whole day\* (Twitter)

These facts indicate that a purely pragmatic account is insufficient and a syntactic account is needed.

#### **4. Modified pronouns**

Note first that virtual performatives have a striking resemblance to sentences containing a modified 1SG pronoun:

- (6) a. *The 30 year old me misses the 20 year old me.*  
b. *Questions A Younger Me Would Ask Myself.*  
c. *A younger me would have seen my past mistakes as unconquerable obstacles when in fact—I now realize—they were so much more.*  
d. *The conservative me dreaded the change, but once again, I am totally in love with this hair & this color.*

Similarly to what we observed with virtual performatives, there is 3SG agreement on the verb and 1SG agreement in co-reference and binding. The reason for this split behaviour is the unique nature of the subject: it is a DP made up of a determiner, an adjectival modifier and the pronoun *me*. I argue that that such adjectivally premodified pronouns are in essence similar to modified proper names:

- (7) *Once again, the transformational Obama has been sold out by the political Obama.*

According to Quine (1960), Paul (1994) and Gärtner (2004), premodified proper names refer to a spatio-temporal stage or part of the individual concerned (inspired by Link's 1983 lattice-theoretical approach to plural entities). Extending this analysis to the pronominal realm, I argue that premodified pronouns also refer to a spatio-temporal stage or part of the individual referred to:

- (8) a. *the 18-year-old Churchill* = ‘the stage of Churchill when he was 18 yrs old’  
 b. *the 30-year-old me* = ‘the stage of me when I was 30 yrs old’

Further, I argue that the subject of a virtual performative is a 1SG pronoun premodified by an underspecified temporal adjectival modifier:

- (9) \**jumps in excitement*\* is equivalent to: *the utterance-time me jumps in excitement*

While *the utterance-time me* is rather stilted, various paraphrases of it are amply attested:

- (10) a. *I'm proud of the past me, the present me, and I'm excited to see what the future me accomplishes.*  
 b. *I think the me right now is sort of at the level 50 of tennis, and everything else in my life is at level five or six.*  
 c. *And as for the splitting time, the me in this very moment doesn't like the idea of it, but I know that is largely situational thinking.*  
 d. *The current me has continued to develop, to deepen my understanding, and this clouds the memory of the younger me.*

More precisely, a virtual performative has a subject of the form [D  $t_x$ -ADJ 1SG], i.e., where the temporal argument  $t_x$  is left unspecified. In the absence of contextual clues to the contrary, the default inference is that  $t_x$  = utterance time, but in the presence of contextual clues, it can be a different time (cf. 3). Since  $t_x$ -ADJ is underspecified, it is also ineffable and has to remain silent. However, this would result in the ungrammatical surface form \**the  $\emptyset$  me*, and therefore, the whole subject has to remain silent: a silent subject, while not fully grammatical (and hence restricted to a special informal register) is preferable to an overt ungrammatical subject.

Note also that the virtual performative as a whole is also unspecified for tense: this explains why no past or future tense forms are available, only the suffix –s, which can be argued to be unspecified for tense as long as one takes simple present to be the unmarked, default tense. Virtual performatives are also unspecified for aspect: –ing forms are unattested and unacceptable (even though the default interpretation of contemporaneity with the utterance would actually make –ing forms likely to appear):

- (11) a. \**sings myself happy birthday*\* -> OK  
 b. \**is singing myself happy birthday*\* -> very bad and unattested

In terms of the syntax of the subject, I follow Weerman & Evers-Vermeul (2002) and Neeleman & Szendrői (2007) in assuming that pronouns spell out the whole DP. I propose that in the case of modified pronouns, the intervening adjective blocks the merger of  $D^0$  and  $N^0$  and as a result,  $D^0$  needs to be spelled out separately:

- (12) a. [DP [D *the*] [NP [AdjP *current*] [NP *me*]]]  
 b. [DP [D *the*] [NP [AdjP *political*] [NP *Obama*]]]

My proposal is technically similar to Matushansky's (2006) analysis of proper names, with one substantial difference: while Matushansky (2006) follows the definite description theory for proper names, this clearly cannot be extended to pronouns. Incidentally, pre-modified pronouns seem to provide evidence against the assumption that pronouns are base-generated in  $D^0$  (Longobardi 1994): if this were indeed the case, one would need an operation to move them down so that *the* can occupy the vacated  $D^0$ , an unlikely scenario.

In terms of the split agreement phenomena in case of 1SG pronouns<sup>2</sup>, my proposal is that this reflects that verbal agreement is sensitive to the phi-feature content of  $D^0$  (3SG by default) while binding and coreference are sensitive to the phi-feature content of  $N^0$ . This results in three possible configurations:

- 1) Premodified proper names: there is no split agreement as both  $D^0$  and  $N^0$  are 3SG.
- 2) Non-modified pronouns: there is no split agreement as  $D^0$  and  $N^0$  are merged and the phi-features of  $N^0$  overwrite or take precedence over the default 3SG specification of  $D^0$ .
- 3) Modified 1SG pronouns: there is split agreement as  $D^0$  is 3SG by default and  $N^0$  is 1SG and no merger takes place due to intervening adjectival modifier.

## **5. Summary of the main argument**

To summarize the main argument of this paper, I have argued that virtual performatives are full, non-truncated clauses, and their subjects are first person singular personal pronouns modified by an adjectival temporal expression and they are unspecified for tense. Tense underspecification leads to the ineffability of the adjectival temporal modifier and, as a consequence, of the whole subject. The split agreement phenomena are caused by an unresolved mismatch of the phi-feature content of  $D^0$  and  $N^0$ , and are part of a more general pattern which also involves overt adjectivally premodified pronouns.

In the remainder of this paper, I discuss certain empirical details (optional determiner-drop, the obligatory silence of the subject, non-1SG pronouns and another D+Adj+Proper name / Pronoun construction) and highlight the main differences between virtual performatives and other, somewhat similar constructions such as the reduced written register, imposters and radically truncated clauses.

## **6. The contrast with the RWR and RTCs**

In virtual performatives, determiner-drop is relatively frequent but by no means obligatory. In fact, the drop and non-drop strategy may be exhibited within a single utterance:

- (13) *\*backflips into room full of money\* \*realizes I can't do backflips\* \*wakes from a dream on the floor with broken neck\**

Also, determiner-drop does not depend on the argumenthood of the DP; unlike, e.g., in the radically truncated clauses (RTCs) in Hungarian discussed by Halm (2021). Some object DPs exhibit determiner-drop and others do not:

- (14) a. *\*waves hankie floppishly\**

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<sup>2</sup> Here I am limiting the discussion to premodified 1SG pronouns. See Section 8 for an extension to other persons and numbers.

- b. \*waves a lipgloss hoping to distract you...\*

Likewise, some non-predicate-argument DPs exhibit determiner-drop and others do not:

- (15) a. \*runs to the kitchen\*  
 b. <----- runs to bathroom to admire my new stunning self!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

This empirical picture strongly favours an analysis similar to that offered by Weir (2017) with regard to optional determiner drop in the English reduced written register (RWR), as opposed to a Sportiche-style (2005) analysis such as the one that Halm (2021) proposed for obligatory determiner-drop in Hungarian radically truncated clauses.

In virtual performatives, subjects are obligatorily silent across the board, that is, there is no difference between verb classes such as transitives (16a), unergatives (16b) or unaccusatives (16c):

- (16) a. \*eats cookie smugly\*  
 b. \*jumps in excitement\*  
 c. \*arrives late from the restroom\* (source: Reddit)

Obligatoriness is a major difference between virtual performatives and the reduced written register (Haegeman 1987, Massam & Roberge 1989, Massam 1992 a.o), where subject drop is typical but optional:

- (17) a. *I am meeting my solicitor today.*  
 b. *Am meeting my solicitor today.*

In virtual performatives, the subject is never overt: neither a 1SG or 3SG pronoun, nor a name, nor an imposter is admissible:

- (18) a. \*laughs like a hyena\*  
 b. ungrammatical: \*He laughs like a hyena.\*  
 c. ungrammatical: \*I laughs like a hyena.\*  
 d. ungrammatical: \*yours truly laughs like a hyena\*  
 e. ungrammatical: \*my sorry self laughs like a hyena\*

A further contrast is that in the RWR (19), non-1SG dropped subject pronouns are perfectly acceptable, whereas in virtual performatives (20) the subject is obligatorily 1SG:

- (19) a.  $\emptyset_i$  Forgets that she<sub>i</sub> has to be up at 7.  $\emptyset_i$  Remembers that she<sub>i</sub> doesn't care and stays up anyway.  
 b.  $\emptyset_i$  Gets mad when people ignore him.
- (20) a. ungrammatical: \*  $\emptyset_i$  forgets that she<sub>i</sub> has to be up at 7\* \*  $\emptyset_i$  remembers that she<sub>i</sub> doesn't care and stays up anyway\*  
 b. ungrammatical: \*  $\emptyset_i$  gets mad when people ignore him<sub>i</sub>\*

The fact that subjects of transitives, unergatives and unaccusatives are uniformly silent (and syntactically active) differentiates virtual performatives from radically truncated clauses (Halm 2021): in the latter construction, internal arguments are overt<sup>3</sup> and syntactically active, whereas external arguments are syntactically absent.

## **7. The contrast with imposters**

In imposters in general (Collins and Postal 2012), clausemate reflexives exhibit alternation in pronominal feature values. One exception is exemplified in (21c): singular imposters cannot be antecedents of first person reflexives (certainly in English):

- (21) a. *In this reply, [the present authors]<sub>1</sub> attempt to defend ourselves<sub>1</sub>/themselves<sub>1</sub> against the scurrilous charges that have been made.*  
b. *Your<sub>1</sub> Majesty should praise yourself<sub>1</sub>/herself<sub>1</sub>.*  
c. *Daddy<sub>1</sub> is enjoying \*myself<sub>1</sub>/himself<sub>1</sub>.*

In contrast to this, with premodified pronouns and in virtual performatives, there is no such alternation. Also, imposters have to refer to the speaker or the hearer. As we have seen, however, the construction under discussion here is open to non-participants as well:

- (22) a. *Being the adventurous him, he went for the Umami bomb after much consideration.*  
b. *Once again, the transformational Obama has been sold out by the political Obama.*

Furthermore, imposters refer to the totality of the speaker or hearer, whereas adjectivally premodified pronouns refer to a stage or part of speaker or hearer (or non-participant). Finally, while in Collins & Postal's (2012) model, an imposter such as *the present author* is supposed to contain a null 1SG indexical pronoun; adjectivally premodified pronouns in general (with the exception of virtual performatives) contain an overt pronoun.

Because of space constraints, a comparison with other constructions such as camouflage DPs (*your honour, my ass*, cf. Collins, Moody & Postal 2008), pronouns modified by appositive DPs (*we, the authors of this proposal*) and partitive DPs (*every one of us*) has to be left for future work.

## **8. Modified pronouns other than 1SG**

While in virtual performatives, the subject is obligatorily 1SG, the broader adjectivally modified pronoun construction is open to all persons and numbers:

- (23) a. *Tell us the advice that you would give the 16 year old you.*  
b. *Being the adventurous him, he went for the Umami bomb after much consideration.*  
c. *The younger us were such idiots.*

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<sup>3</sup> Hungarian being a pro-drop language, internal arguments may of course be little pros as well.

- d. *For many young, healthy adults, high blood pressure is a distant worry—something the “older them” will have to deal with.*

The generalization that verbal agreement is sensitive to phi-features of D<sup>0</sup> (3<sup>rd</sup> person) whereas binding and coreference are sensitive to the phi-features of the pronoun holds:

- (24) a. *The five-year-old you was so cute!*  
 b. *The younger us were so confident of ourselves.*

The only complication concerns that phi-features of the determiner *the*. Note that so far, we have been making the simplifying assumption that *the* has the features 3SG. This surely needs to be revised as *the* is perfectly happy to combine with plural nouns too: *the blue houses*, *the young Kennedys* etc. One possibility would be to assume that *the* is unspecified for number and the number feature of N<sup>0</sup> percolates to D<sup>0</sup> (since the person feature of D<sup>0</sup> is specified, the person feature of N<sup>0</sup> does not percolate<sup>4</sup>). Another alternative is to assume that English has two *thes*: *the<sub>SG</sub>* and *the<sub>PL</sub>*. This is not so far-fetched as it may appear since many Germanic languages have a similar situation: consider German *die<sub>F,SG</sub>* – *die<sub>PL</sub>*, Dutch *de<sub>F/M,SG</sub>* – *de<sub>PL</sub>*, or Afrikaans *die<sub>SG</sub>* – *die<sub>PL</sub>*. Here I remain agnostic as to which of these options is more attractive. For our purposes, both ensure that D<sup>0</sup> is eventually supplied with the number features needed for verbal agreement:

- (25) a. *The<sub>3SG</sub> five-year-old you<sub>2SG</sub> was<sub>3SG</sub> so cute!*  
 b. *The<sub>3PL</sub> younger us<sub>1PL</sub> were<sub>PL</sub> so confident of ourselves<sub>1PL</sub>.*

## 9. Externalization of the self?

As we have seen, with adjectivally premodified pronouns, binding and co-reference are sensitive to the phi-features of the pronoun. There is one principled exception to this pattern though: the case when there is a temporal contrasting of different stages of the referent:

- (26) *The 17 year-old me was pretty fucking awesome and I owe her a lot for who I am today.*  
 ‘The 17-year-old stage of me was pretty fucking awesome and the current stage of me owes the 17-year-old stage of me a lot for who the current stage of me is.’

The sentence expresses the beliefs of the current stage of the speaker, and there is a contrast between two stages. As a result, in the sentence where pronouns referring to both stages are present, the one referring to the less prominent stage is interpreted as third person. A similar pattern is observable below:

- (27) *While it isn't for everybody, I am so glad senior-year me trusted her instincts and took the leap.*  
 ‘The current stage of me is glad that the senior-year stage of me trusted the senior-year stage of me’s instincts and took the leap’

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<sup>4</sup> Note also that it has been independently argued that person as such does not percolate (cf. Den Dikken 2019 for a recent specific proposal to this effect).



Contrast this with the following:

- (28) *(The) 10 year old me was lonely. I sat on my own most lunchtimes.*  
'The 10-year-old stage of me was lonely. The 10-year-old stage of me was sitting on the 10-year-old-stage of me's own most lunchtimes.'

Here, the narrative is focused exclusively on the 10-year old me, there is no contrasting of the various stages. Consider also a more complex example below, where in addition to various stages of the speaker, the totality of the speaker is also being referred to:

- (29) *this year i took risks and chances that 12 year old me only dreamed of, 17 year old me doubted i could do, & 22 year old me thought was too late to even try.*  
'This year the current stage of me took risks and chances that the 12-year-old stage of me only dreamed of, the 17 year-old stage of me doubted that the the totality (all stages) of me could do, and the 22-year-old stage of me thought was too late to even try'

To sum up, when two different chunks of the speaker are directly contrasted, one of them switches to 3SG. While the details need to be worked out, I think Virtanen's (2020) pragmatic proposal involving an externalization of the virtual self, while not an adequate explanation of virtual performatives in general, can in fact account for this particular subpattern.

#### **10. Another D+Adj+Proper name construction**

Finally, for completeness, it has to be noted that there exists another D+Adj+Proper name construction, with a very different semantics. Consider:

- (30) a. *The wise Marcus Aurelius had a blind spot for his family.*  
= 'M.A., who was (generally) wise, had a blind spot for his family.'  
≠ 'The wise part of M.A. had a blind spot for his family.'  
b. *Responding combatively to repeated questions about the plans, a visibly irritated Mr Andrews defended the trade agreement.*  
= 'Mr Andrews, who was visibly irritated (at the moment), defended the trade agreement.'  
≠ 'The visibly irritated part of Mr Andrews defended the trade agreement'

Pronouns (1, 2 and 3) are also attested in this construction:

- (31) a. *An exhausted me has felt that I'm not doing a good enough job...*  
b. *When I walked into the room, I saw a visibly tired you.*  
c. *Burned food coming from a frustrated him can only mean one thing: [...].*

Semantically, there is no reference being made to stages or parts of the individual in the sense of Quine (1960), Paul (1994) and Gärtner (2004); nor is the adjectival modification intersective: in (30a), we are not referring to an individual in the intersection of [[wise]] and [[Marcus Aurelius]]: rather, we refer to a specific person called Marcus Aurelius, and we non-restrictively characterize him as wise. The choice of article depends on the type of

predicate: the definite article goes with individual-level predicates (such as *wise*) and the indefinite article with stage-level predicates (such as *irritated*). Interestingly, with pronouns, only stage-level predicates seem to work:

- (32) ungrammatical: *The wise me has a blind spot for my family.*  
intended: While I am wise in general, I have a blind spot for my family.

For reasons of space, a proper analysis of this construction has to be left for future work.

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