

Short En bref

“We are 9 degrees and sunny”: the use of personal pronouns with weather predicates

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Abstract

This squib discusses a construction heard during weather reports on CBC Radio One in Manitoba whereby personal pronouns appear as the subjects of weather predicates. We show that the use of *we/you* in statements like *we are minus 15 degrees* and *Brandon, you are sunny* is unlike other non-prototypical uses for personal pronouns that have been noted in the literature and argue they index place rather than person. We note that the deictic coordinates of the utterance that are spelled out by these pronouns are necessary for a felicitous interpretation of weather statements, even though they are typically implicit. This implicit deixis, in turn, sheds light on a long-standing claim that weather-*it*, in contrast to a true expletive, is ‘quasi-argumental’ (Chomsky 1981). That is, we suggest that the deictic coordinates of an utterance are ‘quasi-arguments’.

Keywords: personal pronouns, spatial deixis, expletives, weather predicates, quasi-arguments

Résumé

Cette note traite d’une construction entendue dans les bulletins météorologiques diffusés sur CBC Radio One au Manitoba, où les pronoms personnels apparaissent comme sujets des prédicats météorologiques. Nous montrons que l’utilisation de *we/you* dans des énoncés comme *we are minus 15 degrees* et *Brandon, you are sunny* est différente des autres utilisations non-typiques des pronoms personnels qui ont été notées dans la littérature, et nous soutenons

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qu'ils indexent le lieu plutôt que la personne. Nous notons que les coordonnées déictiques de l'énoncé qui sont précisées par ces pronoms sont nécessaires à une interprétation correcte des bulletins météorologiques, même si elles sont généralement implicites. Cette déixis implicite, à son tour, met en lumière une affirmation de longue date selon laquelle *weather-it*, contrairement à un véritable explétif, est « quasi-argumental » (Chomsky 1981). En d'autres termes, nous suggérons que les coordonnées déictiques d'un énoncé sont des « quasi-arguments. »

Mots-clés: pronoms personnels, déixis spatiale, explétifs, prédicats météorologiques, quasi-arguments

1. INTRODUCTION

In formal syntactic theory, it is commonly assumed that weather verbs such as *rain* and *snow* do not assign any theta roles and take an expletive subject, *it* (Chomsky 1981). This follows from the fact that meteorological events lack distinct participants such as agent and patient (Eriksen et al. 2010). Chomsky uses weather verbs to make a finer distinction among expletives. He notes that in examples like the following, the *it* of weather predicates can control PRO:

- (1) *It sometimes rains after [___ snowing].* (Chomsky 1981: 324)

This fact, that *weather-it* can control PRO, distinguishes it on the one hand from a true pleonastic, like *it* or *there* in subject position, which cannot control PRO, and on the other hand from a true pronominal argument which can be replaced by a fully referential noun phrase. He concludes that *weather-it* is a *quasi-argument* (p. 325).

In this squib we provide evidence to support the idea that *weather-it* differs from a true pleonastic pronoun (which we will simply refer to as an expletive from now on). The evidence comes from the occurrence of personal pronouns as subjects of weather predicates in weather reports on CBC Radio One in Manitoba. We focus on examples such as the following, which to our knowledge have not been noted in the literature before:¹

- (2) a. *and right now in Winnipeg we've gone down the degree, we are 12*
(compare: *it is 12*)
b. *we are sunny in the downtown* (compare: *it is sunny*)

In these examples a first-person plural pronoun is used where we normally find *weather-it*, as shown in the parentheses in (2). These examples are in sharp contrast with examples where a personal pronoun replaces a true expletive:

- (3) a. *It seems that prices are rising.*
b. **We seem that prices are rising.*

We argue that the substitution of *we* for *it* in weather constructions supports the quasi-argument status of *weather-it* (cf. Gardelle 2015).²

¹All unattributed examples were collected from Manitoba's CBC Radio One in the summers of 2019 and 2022.

²Given that we are using naturally occurring data, we are unable to determine whether or not these first person plural subjects can control PRO in order to further support our claim.

The squib is organized as follows. In section 2 we briefly review the literature on meteorological expressions and describe uses of personal pronouns with weather predicates that have been noted for English. We add to these uses the construction exemplified in (2) above. In section 3 we discuss how this use of personal pronouns is different from other uses that have been identified in the literature. In section 4 we present our analysis, namely, that the bolded pronominal subjects in (2) are making deictic reference to the location for which the weather is being reported. Section 5 concludes the squib.

2. PERSONAL PRONOUNS AS SUBJECTS OF WEATHER PREDICATES

In their cross-linguistic study of meteorological expressions, Eriksen et al. (2010) state that weather phrases are either a predicate type (e.g., *it rains*), an argument type (e.g., *rain falls*), or an argument-predicate type (e.g., *rain rains*). In other words, the type of expression is determined by whether the weather information is given in the predicate, as an argument, or is divided between the two. English weather phrases, according to Eriksen et al., tend to be of the predicate type with an expletive subject. In languages that pattern like English, subject expletives are either in the form of neuter pronouns like *it* or spatial adverbs like *there*. Danish, for example, allow *there*-expletives with adjectival weather predicates:³

(4) Danish

<i>Der</i>	<i>er</i>	<i>koldt</i>	<i>udenfor.</i>
there	be.PRES	cold.N.SG	outside

'It is cold outside.'

(Eriksen et al. 2010: 573)

Larsson (2014) similarly notes that in the dialects of some Scandinavian languages, locatives like *her/här* 'here' and *der/där* 'there' can be used instead of the more common *det* 'it' as the subject of weather predicates – for example, *här regnar* 'here rains' in Swedish (Hulthén 1944: 43, cited in Larsson 2014: 66). While these locatives usually have an expletive function, Larsson suggests that *här*, in particular, may have retained its deictic locative property even in subject position in some dialects.

Following their earlier work, Eriksen et al. (2015) focus on the subjects of predicate type meteorological expressions and note that lexical subjects are possible when they are adverbial in nature, referencing place (e.g., name of a city), time (e.g., today or yesterday), or the atmospheric background (e.g., sky or weather). The authors call these subjects "promoted adverbials", a point to which we will return in section 4.

With respect to pronouns as subjects of meteorological expressions, Eriksen et al. (2010) note that some languages allow "human pronouns" like *he* or *she* to appear as expletive subjects, citing Norwegian and Swedish dialects, Icelandic, and Faroese:

(5) Faroese

<i>Hann</i>	<i>kavar.</i>
he	SNOW.PRES

'It is snowing.'

(Eriksen et al. 2010: 574)

³The N in the gloss of *koldt* stands for neuter gender.

While it is clear from the interpretation that the third person pronoun in (5) serves as an expletive, non-expletive uses of third-person pronouns with weather predicates in English are also attested. Gardelle (2015) undertakes a corpus study to identify the conditions under which expressions like *She's raining and thundering hard* are used. Putting aside cases where the pronoun has a textual antecedent such as Mother Nature, Gardelle proposes that the feminine pronoun with no antecedent adds “emotional involvement” (p. 15) such as feelings of enthusiasm or annoyance. She links these uses to others that do not involve weather predicates such as *let 'er rip*. She also addresses the question of why it is specifically the feminine pronoun that is used in this way, with reference to theories that have been advanced by others (e.g., Svartengren 1927, Joly 1976, Mathiot and Roberts 1979, and Stenroos 2008), though she does not ultimately endorse any of them.

Our brief survey of the literature on weather phrases reveals that first person plural pronouns as subjects of weather predicates have not been discussed. These subjects are not expletive, are not obviously adverbial, and do not have the same flavour of emotional involvement that the third person feminine pronoun contributes. In the next section we briefly survey the literature on non-canonical uses of the first-person plural pronoun in order to show that its use with weather predicates has not been noted in those discussions either.

3. NON-PROTOTYPICAL USES OF THE FIRST PERSON PLURAL PRONOUN

The prototypical use of the first person plural pronoun is to refer to the speaker and one or more contextually given associates (see, for example, Ackema and Neelman 2018). However, like all other pronouns, first person plural pronouns may have non-prototypical uses as well (Helmbrecht 2015). In this section we review the non-prototypical uses of *we* identified by Helmbrecht in order to show that its use in weather reports is of a different nature. We put aside the distinctions between dual vs. plural, and inclusive vs. exclusive first-person pronouns because they are not morphologically marked in English.

Helmbrecht (2015) considers non-prototypical uses of first, second, and third person pronouns, with most of his examples drawn from German. Here we present his description of first-person plural pronouns, illustrated with either adapted English translations of his invented examples (6a–e) or examples we have invented ourselves (6f). Helmbrecht (2015: 182–3) notes that a first-person plural pronoun can be used as a third person plural (6a) when a sports fan refers to their team. It can be used as a second-person singular (6b) when the pronoun refers to the addressee (the so-called nursery-*we*) or as a second person plural (6c) when the pronoun refers to a group of addressees. It can be used as a first-person singular (6d) by someone with very high-ranking such as royal status and/or social or political superiority (the royal *we*). It can also be used as a first-person singular (6e) when single authors refer to themselves in the plural in academic writing to achieve more authority or formality. While Helmbrecht does not give an English example of the first-person plural pronoun being used as an impersonal or generic pronoun, examples like (6f) arguably show this.

- (6) a. *We lost again last night.* (1PL → 3PL, uttered by the supporter of a sports team)
 b. *How do we feel today?* (1PL → 2SG, doctor to patient)
 c. *In the last class we learned about c-command.* (1PL → 2PL, instructor to students)
 d. *Yesterday, we gave the order that ...* (1PL → 1SG, *pluralis majestatis*)
 e. *In the previous chapter we argued that ...* (1PL → 1SG, 'editorial-we')
 f. *We often laugh when we are nervous.* (1PL → impersonal/generic)

Helmbrecht convincingly shows that all pronouns can undergo person and/or number shifts for various pragmatic effects. However, we note that in none of the examples in (6) can *we* be replaced by expletive *it* because they all receive theta roles from the predicates with which they occur. That is, the pronouns in (6) are fully referential and can be replaced by full noun phrases. In contrast, the *we* in statements like *we are five degrees* does not instantiate a person/number shift, does not stand in for another referential pronoun, and cannot be replaced by a full noun phrase. Rather, as we explain in the next section, the *we* in weather reports refers to the location in which the speaker and their contextual given associates are situated.

4. ANALYSIS

Reports like *we are five degrees* and *we are raining* have been heard by the first author on the radio in Winnipeg for at least fifteen years. A small corpus of weather reports gathered from CBC radio in fall 2019 confirmed that the construction is used by more than one CBC announcer in Winnipeg but is not used in other major cities.⁴ We are not making any sociolinguistic claims based on its occurrence on one radio station in one Canadian city. We believe that the fact that it is possible to use a first-person plural pronoun as the subject of a weather predicate *anywhere* is worth investigation.

We are five degrees is one of a number of variations on a theme that are used to avoid repetition while reporting the weather on the radio.⁵ As background, meteorological reports in Canada contain information such as the high and low for the day in degrees Celsius, weather conditions (e.g., sunny, cloudy, foggy, etc.), the type, likelihood, and amount of precipitation, the direction and velocity of the wind, plus the humidex at the height of summer and wind chill at the height of winter. Reporting this information on the radio may simply involve some descriptive noun phrases (7a), two noun phrases juxtaposed as a list (7b), or in a topic-comment structure (7c):

⁴The corpus consisted of recorded and transcribed weather reports on CBC radio in Halifax, Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver and Winnipeg, with the goal of simply noting whether the target construction (*we are [weather predicate]*) occurred or not.

⁵We thank Pat Kaniuga, long-time CBC journalist, producer, and studio director for the weekday morning show on Radio One in Winnipeg for having a conversation with Jila Ghomeshi in 2019 to discuss how he presents the weather on the radio. Kaniuga, a native Winnipegger, noted that he creates weather scripts that go beyond what he receives from the CBC meteorologist in Manitoba, in order to make the forecast more interesting for the listener. He retired from the CBC on December 22, 2023.

- (7) a. *afternoon high today of 14 degrees*
 b. *showers, risk of a thunderstorm*
 c. *tonight, a low of 14 degrees*

Expletive subjects as well as subjects like *the high/low* are also common:

- (8) a. *It's 25 in Winnipeg.*
 b. *It's lightly raining.*
 c. *The high is/will be 14 degrees.*

The examples in (8) all involve a copula verb *be*; however, there are a few other verbs that frequently occur in weather reports and that can take first person plural subjects:

- (9) a. *We will get up close to 30 degrees.*
 b. *We are at 24 degrees.*
 c. *We should wind up around 21 degrees.*
 d. *We are headed to a high of minus 10 degrees.*

We propose that these are metaphorical constructions that involve viewing temperatures as locations and “we” as the travellers to those locations.⁶ Unlike true weather constructions in which there is no theta role for the subject, we argue that the first person plural subjects in constructions like (9) get theta roles from the predicates (e.g., *be at, get close to, wind up around, head to*). For this reason, expletive *it* is not a possible subject in these sentences.

Returning to the constructions that are the focus of this squib, we claim that sentences like *we are five degrees* are not metaphorical constructions, based on the fact that *we* can alternate with expletive *it* as the subject (cf. *we are/it is five degrees*). Our proposal is that *we* is the realization of one of the deictic coordinates of the utterance, i.e., the key aspects of the context of utterance that can be encoded by deictic elements. Among the deictic coordinates that are available to interlocutors are the speaker and addressee, typically encoded by first and second person pronouns, respectively; the space occupied by or around the speaker, typically encoded by spatial adverbs like *here*; and the time of utterance, typically encoded by temporal adverbs like *now*. These are referred to as person, spatial, and temporal deixis respectively (see, for example, Fillmore 1997; Levinson 1983, 2004; and Saeed 2016).

The location of the person giving a weather report is particularly important, though often unexpressed. This is because statements such as *it's sunny, it's raining, it is minus three degrees* are not understood to be true of everywhere in the world at all points in time. They are understood to be true of the speaker's location at the moment of utterance (*here* and *now*). The speaker's location is understood, in turn, to be the maximal geographical area across which the weather is uniform such as

⁶The primary metaphor used with temperature is that of a vertical scale such that high numbers are ‘up’ and low numbers are ‘down’. This is reflected in the use of ‘high’ and ‘low’ but also in the verbs used with temperature such as *climb, fall*, etc. (cf. Taylor 2003: 109 on the notion of ascent in the verb *climb* when used with a subject like *the temperature*).

a city or a town. Note that on the radio the location for which the report is being given may, but need not be, expressed overtly as a prepositional or adverbial phrase (e.g., *It's sunny and minus five degrees in Winnipeg*). Overt expression of location is rarer in conversation presumably because it is evident to all speech participants where they are. In other words, if all participants in a conversation are in Winnipeg, it is unnecessary to add *in Winnipeg* or *here* to statements like *It's cold*.

To summarize so far, we are claiming that a location is a necessary part of meteorological statements and that it can be expressed via an adverbial phrase. In expressions like *we are five degrees* we see that the realization of this location is innovative in two ways: (a) that the location is expressed as the subject and (b) that the location is expressed via a personal pronoun. With respect to the first point, we have seen that there are languages that allow locative adverbs such as *here* (Erikson et al. 2010, Larsson 2014) or other types of “promoted adverbials” that index location (Erikson et al. 2015) to serve as the subjects of meteorological predicates. With respect to the second point, we propose that the first-person plural pronoun is a possible realization of the information encoded in the locative adverb *here*, because this adverb in turn necessarily includes the location of the speech participants.⁷ In other words, *here* in a given interaction between speech participants, means *where we are*. In proposing that the implicit person features involved in spatial deixis can be spelled out as a personal pronoun rather than as a DP (e.g., *the place we are*) or an adverb (e.g., *here*), we are extending the non-prototypical uses of pronouns identified by Helmbrecht to encompass not only person and number shifts (see discussion of the examples in (6) above) but also a shift from location to person – a type of personification of location.

The personification of location can be extended to the use of second-person pronouns when the location (“where you are”) is clearly identified by name and is distinct from the location from which the report is being broadcast. Thus, alongside reports like *We are minus fifteen* we get the following:

- (10) a. *Brandon, you are minus ten.* [cf. *It's minus ten in Brandon.*]
 b. *Thompson, you are cloudy and a balmy minus five degrees.* [cf. *It's cloudy and a balmy minus five degrees in Thompson*]

Note that Brandon and Thompson are cities in Manitoba but are being addressed vocatively in the examples in (10).⁸ These examples bear a striking resemblance to those noted by Piepers et al. (2021) in their Twitter corpus. Piepers et al. gather examples like *Amsterdam, you're raining*, which appears in the title of their paper, noting that they involve a vocative and a spatio-temporal addressee personified by a second

⁷According to Levinson (1983: 79), *here* denotes a “pragmatically given unit of space that includes the location of the speaker at [time of utterance]”. Given that the adverb includes information about the location of the speaker, the substitution of *I/we* for *here* could be viewed as a kind of metonymy.

⁸It is also possible to get constructions like *Brandon is sunny* or *Thompson is five degrees* on the radio, where the name of the city is used metonymically for the location in subject position. Again, this would be a case of a promoted adverbial as identified by Erikson et al. (2015).

person pronoun. They argue that the user's goal is to tell an imagined audience about an experience they have had at a certain place and time. However, there are at least two differences between the two types of constructions. First, their corpus includes not only meteorological observations but also positive and negative evaluations (*Valentine's Day, you are a bitch*). Moreover, what they identify as the illocution of these utterances – evaluating a first-hand experience (p. 107) – is absent in the weather reports we have been discussing. Second, first person plural pronouns are unattested in their corpus while they are prevalent in our examples. While the constructions differ, taken together they show that the personification of spatio-temporal coordinates may not be so rare.

As a final note, while this squib has focused on the use of *we* for location in weather reports, we have heard at least one instance of *we* for time as well:

- (11) [Pilot on Air Canada flight YYC to YWG (AC288, November 17, 2019)]
Hope to have you on the ground early at 40 minutes past the hour. Right now, we are 17 minutes past.

Again, the use of *we* as subject in the utterance above is shorthand for *it is 17 minutes past where we are*. In the absence of any explicit spatial or temporal elements in the utterance, the deictic coordinates are taken to be where the speech participants are and can be referenced through a personal pronoun.

5. CONCLUSION

In this squib we have introduced novel data showing that first and second person plural pronouns can be used instead of expletive *it* as the subjects of weather predicates in weather reports. We have argued that these pronouns spell out the one of the deictic coordinates of the utterance, namely the location, through metonymy (the association of *here* with *where we are*). Noting that weather *it* has been considered a 'quasi-argument', we are now in a position to identify how it differs from a true expletive.

A true expletive bears no theta role at all; however, theta roles originate from predicates. Information about the time and location of an utterance as well as the identity of the speaker and addressee – the deictic coordinates of an utterance – can perhaps be seen as propositional arguments (see, for example, Demirdache and Uribe-Etxebarria 2004, who argue that tense and aspect are predicates that take times as arguments). We suggest that a 'quasi-argument' may be the realization of one of these propositional arguments (time, location, interlocutor) that are often implicit but the interpretation of which is crucial to understanding an utterance in its context.

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