

The Continuity of the Dialectal them

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The article deals with the non-standard *them* as an element of the deictic system of non-standard grammar. It is suggested that its most prominent function is that resembling a plural article.

1.

A very prominent and widespread marker of non-standard English is *them* as in »Don't worry about *them* dogs, they won't bite«¹

It is usually said to be a demonstrative adjective, equivalent to standard *those*, less frequently *these* (Fries 1940). It will be argued here that *them* has a different scope of reference and that it is best analyzed within non-standard grammar, since it is not organized like the standard pronoun *those*.

Descriptive standard English grammars, even when they discuss language variation (Quirk et al. 1972) and are based on large spoken and written corpora (Cobuild 1990), do not even mention the adjectival usage of *them*. By avoiding any comment they clearly exclude it from both formal and colloquial usage in the 'common core' of educated English, which Quirk et al. (1972:30) claim to be describing.

More curiously, adjectival *them* does not occur in a study of American usage of the late thirties which included 230 items »of whose standing there might be some

¹ Uttered by a lower middle-class character in the American film *Born the 4th of July*.

question«, among them such as *it don't make any difference*. The absence of adjectival *them* has therefore to be interpreted as either »illiterate« or nonexistent. It had, however, been registered in children's speech of that time, and denounced in textbooks as »wholly unpermissible«. The only champion of the usage was Noah Webster saying that it »may be censured as vulgar« but not as ungrammatical, because of its great antiquity (quoted in Mencken 1936:29f).

English grammars written from a historical point of view also classify this usage as popular/vulgar and comparable to the standard adjectival *those*, as do accounts of dialectal grammars. Since *them* is not a member of the class of demonstrative pronouns or adjectives of any of the standard varieties of Modern English, the usefulness of defining it in terms of standard English grammar is doubtful.

2.

From the grammatical point of view, demonstratives are pronouns; from the semantic viewpoint they are deictics. Deixis has been perceived as a primitive linguistic category, evolved in face to face communication from simple utterances used to draw attention to, locate, or identify something. Deictic systems essentially contain pronominals, among which the demonstratives are most prominently deictic, giving information on the location of the referent in terms of proximity to the communicative situation. They also mark at least some other pronominal properties such as number, gender, and case.

Another aspect of the demonstrative pronouns is markedness. Marked forms have greater phonetic substance and more specific grammatical and semantic functions than unmarked ones. Accordingly, the process of reduction which commonly takes place in the spoken language has to operate longer before marked forms disappear from the system than unmarked ones. When reduced, they may acquire abstract or very generalized functions.

Markedness does not seem to be a matter of the presence or absence of a feature, but rather a matter of degree. This makes it possible to speak of demonstrative pronouns as deictically more marked than other deictics, such as the personal pronouns or the article.

3.

Retracing the development of the English deictics from their Indo-European origins it can be seen that the demonstrative pronouns have always been phonologically distinct and compact forms, suitable for frequent usage without much loss of substance. They consist of a monosyllabic stem with a dental consonant, which has survived in a number of modern Indo-European languages (e.g., English *that*, Croatian *to*). The demonstrative pronouns have, furthermore, always had strong and weak, that is stressed and unstressed or marked and unmarked forms, depending on their prominence in the sentence or discourse. As all frequently used forms they occur in numerous (dialectal) variants.

Modern English *them* goes back to Old English *paem/pam*, singular and plural dative forms of the weak demonstrative pronoun. The processes that caused the weakening of inflections in Old English generated considerable shifts and new developments in the pronominal system. In the natural pattern of change, weaker forms like *tha* – *that* were replaced in marked functions by stronger (compound) ones like *this* – *these* – *those*. The weak forms in turn acquired (new) unmarked functions, such as that of the definite article or the relative. The result, in Middle English, was a more elaborate range of deictics, which appeared in an abundance of dialectal forms, surpassing the variety found in Old English. There were also occasional phrasal demonstratives resembling the Modern English *this one here* or *that one there*, which must be assumed to have been more frequent in spoken discourse.

In standard Modern English the ME demonstrative pronouns, *this* – *these*, *that* – *those*, continue to function as strong deictics for near and distant reference, independently or as adjuncts. When unstressed and in adjectival use they approach the functions of articles. Stripped of their proximic meaning they resemble articles with a greater phonetic substance and some syntactic-semantic marking for number, emphasis, attitude etc. The mention of stress implies that we are dealing with the spoken language, which thus seems to have a category of marked (singular and plural) article.

It is clear that the deictic functions of the various pronouns and the articles overlapped in earlier English even more than they do today. It is part of the natural process in which marked forms are used to elaborate on the functions of the unmarked ones. And though *them* in standard English usage is not applied outside its function as the oblique case of the personal pronoun, vernaculars have developed other rules.

4.

The »demonstrative adjective« *them* parallels other developments following the disintegration of the inflectional system, such as switching of the nominative and the remaining oblique case forms of pronouns in a variety of dialects between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. Standardization, which began in the fifteenth century, produced a norm with defined syntactic and semantic functions for the nominative and oblique cases. Case switching, however, has remained a widespread phenomenon in the vernaculars e.g. – *Us don't want t'play wi'he.* (Suffolk) – including also the widely accepted: *It's them.* This seems to be a general tendency in languages with great case syncretism, as borne out by the modern Scandinavian languages.

Moreover, in English vernacular varieties, the oblique case of a pronoun in the adnominal position is used in a number of functions without direct correspondence in the standard varieties e.g. *It wor nobbut us Dad* (Yorkshire), or *Them fellers ketched the dynamite all right* (American West).

If *them* is taken to be a demonstrative pronoun, it has to be viewed together with other demonstratives in English vernaculars. The inventories that can be found in dialect descriptions make it immediately obvious that the list of demonstratives has proliferated since Middle English.

The range covers three grades of proximity expressed by a variety of forms both unmarked and marked. Most prominent are phrasal forms, the most recent type of marked deictics, such as *this here, them ones, yon over yonder*, etc. Additional deictics, often demonstrative adverbs, unambiguously specify the proximity of the referent, no more evident in the simple forms. Demonstratives such as *that, thone* or *those* seem to have retained barely the most elementary deictic meaning. Among their number the most productive deictic is *them*, both in rural and urban speech, in both the Old and the New World.

The origin of this usage is thought to lie in the late Middle and Early Modern English periods in the north-eastern and southern Midlands. It is found in literary texts from the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century (e.g., early editions of Bunyan's works). The usage was found fault with in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century grammars and subsequently censored and replaced in written texts by *those*. But the usage seems to have had a continuous development nevertheless, taking longer to disappear from standard usage (particularly in America) than originally assumed by linguists.

The 1971 edition of the OED notes the latest usage of *them* as (a) a deictic for distant reference with a subject in 1610, (b) with an object, as late as 1726; (c) independently in the subject position in 1777, and (d) as a weak deictic or article, in American English in 1891 (*Them few dogs which he kept must be tied up in the day time*).

In the vernacular *them* has continued in pronominal as well as adjectival usage, but it emerged in literature in the early nineteenth century to indicate non-standard speech. A century and a half later it seems to be spreading 'up market' in spoken varieties.

The question is what is the function of *those* and *them* in standard and non-standard grammars respectively. I would like to argue that among other functions both deictics in fact, when not indicating proximity, behave like articles marked for the plural number. This can be illustrated by the following two examples of such weak deixis, where (a) marks definite reference and (b) generic reference:

(a) *Them few dogs which he kept must be tied up in the day time.* (OED 1971)

Those/The few dogs that he kept...

(b) *Them labber doe retrievers is good for fetching back ducks.* (Charles Nicholson 1989).

(Those) labrador retrievers are good for fetching ducks.

A similar development of the demonstratives can be observed in the Scandinavian languages, where they have developed into personal pronouns, demonstratives, and inflected articles. Marked demonstrative pronouns are phrasal ones like *den/det här* (this here) and *den/det där* (that there). And in spite of a strong tendency towards spelling pronunciation, the nominative plural article *de*, is pronounced *dom/dem* in standard Swedish and some Norwegian dialects.

6.

To conclude: *them* is a deictic form that has survived from the Old English period because of its relatively ample and stable phonetic substance. Case syncretism in English has allowed it to acquire more than one deictic function. Thus, whereas in the standard variety *them* is restricted to the function of personal pronoun, in the vernaculars its deictic range covers both the demonstrative and the article. By marginalizing the case signals, vernaculars have made its wider applicability possible.

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POSTOJANOST DIJALEKTALNOGA THEM.

U članku se raspravlja o nestandardnoj uporabi zamjeničkog oblika *them*, koji se promatra kao dio deiktičkog sustava dijalektalnih gramatika. Ovdje se želi upozoriti na njegovu funkciju, koja je najbližnja množinskom obliku određenoga člana.