

WE ARE NO PLURAL SUBJECT

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Abstract

In On Social Facts (1989) and subsequent works, Margaret Gilbert has suggested a plural subject account of the semantics of 'we' that claims that a central or standard use of 'we' is to refer to an existing or anticipated plural subject. This contrasts with the more general approach to treat plural pronouns as expressions referring to certain pluralities. I argue that (i) the plural subject approach cannot account for certain syntactic phenomena and that (ii) the sense of intimacy, which Gilbert cites as evidence for her plural subject account, has a different source than the existence of joint commitments constituting a respective plural subject. Moreover, (iii) there is a wide variety of phenomena in the linguistic record, which, while not constituting conclusive evidence against the plural subject account, nevertheless, are dealt with better by the plurality account. 'We' thus refers to pluralities, which may or may not be plural subjects. The precise analysis of 'we' thus reveals a multi-layered ontology of groups.

I. Introduction

Starting with Descartes' *cogito* argument, the first person singular has held central position in modern philosophy. In the last decades, however, there has been a certain shift of focus towards social perspectives, not only in ethics, action theory and social philosophy, but also in disciplines like epistemology and ontology. This shift of focus comes along with an increased interest in the word 'we', or, more generally, in the first person plural. As part of her seminal contribution to social ontology, Margaret Gilbert has suggested a plural subject account of the semantics of 'we' (Gilbert 1989). While acknowledging that 'we' is ambiguous, she points out that a central or standard use of 'we' is to refer to an existing or anticipated plural subject. While Gilbert's social ontology has been widely received and discussed, there is virtually no discussion of her semantic claims. The exception that proves the rule is a paper by Boudewijn de Bruin (2009), in which de Bruin argues that Geoffrey Nunberg's theory of indexicals (Nunberg 1993) deals better with the actual use of 'we' than Gilbert's plural subject account. In the present paper, I add a broader basis of evidence to the critical discussion of Gilbert's semantic account of 'we'. Moreover, while

Nunberg presents an account how addressees may infer the object of reference of pronouns and other indexicals, I focus mainly on which kind of objects are in effect referred to. I will argue that it is more plausible to stick to the classical analysis that ‘we’ refers to pluralities which do not need to be Gilbertian plural subjects. For this purpose, I first sketch the plural subject account and its contender, the plurality account (Sect. 2). I then proceed to argue against the plural subject account by pointing to a couple of problems for the plural subject account and by arguing that the sense of intimacy which is sometimes connected with the use of ‘we’ cannot be used as evidence for the plural subject account (Sect. 3). Moreover, I peruse the linguistic record and show that there are a lot of non-canonical uses of first-person plural pronouns which also can better be dealt with within the plurality account, even if they constitute no conclusive evidence against a plural subject account (Sect. 4). I conclude that the plural subject account can deal with a fraction of the linguistic phenomena only, while the plurality account has much wider applicability. This, finally, points to an ontology of pluralities beyond plural subjects (Sect. 5): While it is true that we can use the word ‘we’ to refer to collective persons like Gilbertian plural subjects, we can also use the word ‘we’ to refer to person collectives, i.e., more or less arbitrary aggregates of persons. The precise analysis of ‘we’, that is, reveals a multi-layered ontology of groups.

2. Two Views on Plural Pronouns

2.1. *Pronouns and Their Roles: The Communication Model*

The term ‘person’ is systematically ambiguous—a feature shared by many grammatical terms. On the one hand, ‘person’ refers to a morphological category of the verb (Bußmann 2008a), i.e., a certain form of inflection or, more generally, a certain pattern of syllables. On the other hand, the term ‘person’ refers to what is expressed by this particular kind of inflection or pattern of syllables. This is a crucial distinction, because without it we would not be able to say that the personal pronoun of the first person plural might sometimes *not* be used for the first person plural.

As a rule, personal pronouns are referring expressions. This rule has obvious exceptions, like the impersonal ‘it’ in sentences like ‘It rains’. In any case, the reference of a pronoun is not fixed but depends on the context of utterance. Hence, we cannot state the meaning of pronouns just by naming their refer-

ents, as these vary. A more promising account is to state the roles that these little words take on in the context of sentences.

At least since Dionysios Thrax in the 2nd century BC, it is standard to explain the roles of the three grammatical persons with reference to three different roles in speech: The first person is the speaker, the second person the addressee, and the third person is spoken about.¹ Already Apollonius Dyscolus, in the 2nd century AD, called for more precision because, obviously, the first and second persons are also spoken about. Hence, a refined version has to describe the third person as something that is spoken about but is neither speaker nor addressee of the utterance.² Some have thus drawn the conclusion that the third person is ‘essentially a negative notion’ in that it is characterized by not being sender or addressee (Lyons 1968, 277), and others have concluded that only the first and second person represent speech roles and the third person some other role (Forchheimer 1953, 5–6; Benvéniste 1971, 217; Wales 1995, 51).

2.2. *The Plurality Account of Plural Pronouns*

The communication model is mostly oriented at and restricted to the personal pronouns in the singular. As a first attempt to extend it to the plural pronouns one could assume that pluralities take over the role of the sender, the addressee and the object of the message.³ However, this works only for the third person plural, which is under suspicion of not representing a speech role at all. According to this suggestion, the personal pronoun ‘they’ refers to a plurality which is spoken of, but to which neither sender nor addressee belong. The account fails for the other two persons: Even if a sentence features a ‘you’ in the plural, there may be only one individual addressee involved in the communicative situation. Similarly, the sentence may contain a ‘we’ while there is only one speaker. Sometimes there is indeed a plurality of speakers like the chorus of an ancient tragedy, speaking to a plurality of listeners in the audience. But

1 The roots of this model may be traced back to the characterisation of speech in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (1358a37). Cf. Scherner 1983 and Brandenburg 2005, 138–142. For recent references cf. the *New English Dictionary* quoted by Jespersen 1924, 212 and Bußmann 2008b. A helpful survey of modern definitions is provided by Forchheimer 1953, 4–5. Nothing depends on the numerical order of the grammatical persons; e.g., grammarians from India, as Benveniste (1971, 195) notes, number the persons the other way round, i.e., what western grammarians call the first person is called the third person in Indian grammars.

2 Cf. Apollonius Dyscolus, *De pronomina* 19 (Brandenburg 2005, 263–265).

3 Cf. Wales 1995, 51 (Table 3.1: more than one speaker/addressee). Wales herself acknowledges the shortcomings of her diagram; cf. p. 58: ‘the crude format of table 3.1’.

these cases are the exceptions, not the rule, and it is a commonplace among linguists that ‘*We* is not the plural of *I* in the same way as *boys* is the plural of *boy*.’⁴ The reference of the pronoun ‘we’ typically ‘includes persons other than the speaker’ (Forchheimer 1953, 3). Hence, ‘we’ rather ‘includes a reference to “I” and is plural’ (Lyons 1968, 277). This is, of course, a semantic thesis: ‘We’ does not mean ‘two or more Is’, but ‘I and you’ or ‘I and he’ or ‘I and all these other people’ (Eckersley/Eckersley 1960, 99; Zwicky 1977).⁵

Thus, a somewhat more complex scheme than the original communication model is needed; we have to add a reference to a plurality to the original scheme for the singular pronouns. Hence, the plural pronouns refer to pluralities, of which sender and addressee are or are not members. That is, with respect to the plural pronouns of the English language: ‘we’ refers to a plurality of which the sender is a member; ‘you’ (in its plural use) refers to a plurality of which the addressee is a member, but not the speaker; and ‘they’ refers to a plurality, of which neither sender nor addressee are members.

I will refer to these roles of the plural pronouns as their ‘canonical roles’. As I will detail later, plural pronouns can take on other roles, which can, in contrast, be referred to as ‘non-canonical roles’ (Sect. 4). As reference to pluralities is crucial for this ascription of canonical roles, I will call this approach the ‘plurality approach’. According to the plurality approach, the canonical role of the first person plural is to refer to a plurality, of which the speaker is a member. I will show in section 4, that there are many non-canonical roles the first person plural can play.

This account does not answer the question which particular plurality a pronoun refers to. The reference of ‘we’ is much more variable than the canonical role of ‘we’. The reference of ‘I’ is fixed as ‘the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing *I*’ (Benveniste 1971, 218). When Descartes says ‘I’, he refers to himself. But to whom is he referring when he says ‘we’? Maybe he is referring to the duo consisting of him and Queen Christina, maybe he is referring to all French, all philosophers or all humans. In general, using

4 Eckersley/Eckersley 1960, 99; Lyons 1971, 281; cf. also Wales 1995, 58: ‘we is not normally “more than one” *I*. Cf. also Heidegger 1998, 40–43 = 2009, 36–39.

5 This is a semantic claim that does not exclude the possibility that plural pronouns are ‘morphological plurals’ of singular pronouns. In fact, some languages form plural pronouns by attaching a plural-marker to the singular pronouns (cf. Forchheimer 1953, 16–17, 39, 40–62). E.g., in Mandarin the first person singular is ‘wo’; attaching the plural suffix ‘-men’ to this singular pronoun yields the Mandarin first-person plural pronoun ‘wo-men’. Similarly, the indigenous American language Barbareno Chumash transforms the first person singular ‘k-’ into the dual ‘kis-’ or into the plural ‘kiy-’ by adding appropriate markers (Corbett 2000, 76–77).

the word ‘we’ speakers can localize themselves in one of various pluralities. Because of this, the reference of ‘we’ is for principled reasons underdetermined by its canonical role. The reference is determined by the textual context, the communicative situation, or even the wider cultural ambience (Wales 1995, ch. 2). The absolute ‘we’ is normally an exophoric pronoun, i.e., its reference is not fixed by the text alone but rather by some extra-textual fact, in particular by the communicative context. Just as in the case of ‘I’ it is rarely explicitly stated within the sentence in which the pronoun is used, who the referent of ‘we’ is. Mostly this has to be inferred from the communicative context. However, ‘we’ can also be used endophoric, as in ‘we Americans’ or ‘we philosophers’. In these cases, the reference can be read off the text itself—while ‘we the people’ is again exophoric.

2.3. *Gilbert’s Plural Subject Account of ‘We’*

Margaret Gilbert adds to the plurality view a claim about the nature of the pluralities referred to by means of the first person plural. This claim connects her analysis of ‘we’ with her wider social ontological outlook. In social ontology, Gilbert is known for her plural subject theory, i.e., the claim that a plurality of persons can fuse into a single plural subject by way of a joint commitment. Such plural subjects are ‘unified, complex entities’ (1989, 235), and they can be subjects of actions, intentions, beliefs and attitudes. In the context of the development of her plural subject theory, Gilbert has also extensively discussed the use of the English first-person plural pronoun ‘we’. For a start, Gilbert distinguishes between two ‘uses’ or ‘constructions’ of ‘we’, namely the ‘we ... together’ use and the ‘we ... both’ use (Gilbert 1989, 168; Brooks 1981, 115). The same distinction is often drawn by talking about a collective and a distributive use of ‘we’. The plural subject account especially targets the ‘we together’ constructions. Gilbert’s main tenet is that in the case of the ‘collective we’, ‘we’ refers to a plural subject. She centrally claims ‘that the first person plural pronoun “we” is standardly used in what may be termed the plural subject sense’ (Gilbert 1996, 9, referring to 1989, Ch. 4)—i.e., as referring to a plural subject. This ‘central sense’ of ‘we’ she describes thus:

‘We’ refers to a set of people each of whom shares, with oneself, in some action, belief, attitude, or other such attribute, that is, in some traditionally so-called ‘mental’ attribute. (1989, 153)

In Gilbert’s terms, this ‘set of people’ is not to be thought of as a mathematical

set (dealt with by set theory), but a ‘plural subject’. In analogy to ‘the I’ as the referent of the personal pronoun in the first person singular, Gilbert also calls a plural subject a ‘(collective) we’ (e.g., Gilbert 1996, 292–293). Indeed, ‘we’ and its cognates like ‘our’ or ‘us’ can be used to indicate a certain joint commitment. For example, group members could speak about ‘our rule’ or ‘our laws’ in order to express a joint commitment to these rules or laws (Gilbert 2000, 88 and 109–110; 2006, 242). Similarly, group members could talk about ‘our decision’, ‘our goal’ or ‘our action’—or just say, ‘We did it’ (Gilbert 2000, 149).

Moreover, Gilbert rightly observes that the use of ‘we’ often comes along with a sense of unity, closeness and intimacy (Gilbert 1989, 176; 1996, 221; 2014, 265). Hence, it might often be felt that addressing a person with the pronoun ‘we’ is presumptuous, or too intimate, and there may well be situations where it is well-advised to avoid the use of ‘we’. To use one of Gilbert’s example (Gilbert 2000, 108–109), a lady approached by a gentleman might be disposed to reject the invitation (1a), while being much more disposed to accept an invitation phrased like (1b):⁶

- (1) a. Shall we go for a walk?
 b. Would you like to go for a walk with me?

According to Gilbert’s plural subject interpretation of ‘we’, the reason for the different reaction is that a literal reading of (1a) presupposes the existence of a plural subject, while (1b) does not. Hence one way to react to (1a) would be to say ‘There is no we’—a popular punch line in American culture. Gilbert (1996, 189; 2006, 145) quotes Tonto’s reply to Lone Ranger: ‘*We*, white man?’ Shrek says it to Donkey: ‘Donkey, there’s no “we”, no “our”. There’s just *me* and *my* swamp!’ Appropriate Google searches lead to a plethora of more references. As ‘belonging to the same plural subject’ is an equivalence relation, it is symmetric; hence, the appropriateness of the use of ‘we’ is also a symmetric affair: If it is appropriate for someone out of a number of people to use ‘we’ in order to refer to them, then it is appropriate for any of them. As Gilbert puts it: ‘A solo use is appropriate when a chorus use is also.’ (1989, 196)

For Gilbert, referring to a plural subject is thus the ‘standard use’ of the pronoun ‘we’ (Gilbert 1996, 9), but she mentions also some non-standard uses (Gilbert 1989, 178–179; 1996, 368; 2000, 108). First and foremost, there is the *tendentious use*, where the speaker knows that there is no plural subject but speaks as if to imply that there is one. Very close to this is the *initiatory use*,

6 Cf. de Bruin 2009 for an extensive discussion of another of Gilbert’s examples for this alleged phenomenon, the ‘restaurant case’ (Gilbert 1989, 175–177).

where speakers know that there is no plural subject and does not want to imply that there is one, but nevertheless uses the personal pronoun ‘we’ tentatively in order to signal their own readiness to enter a plural subject. Then there are the respective *complements of these uses*: Whoever is addressed by an utterance containing a tendentious or initiatory use of ‘we’ may respond using a first-person plural pronoun themselves, uttering, for example, a phrase like ‘Yes, we should do it’, or ‘Let’s do this’. By this use of ‘we’ or ‘us’, a joint commitment and, thus, a plural subject comes into existence. Finally, there is the *erroneous use*, in the case of which the speaker wrongly assumes that there is a plural subject. If such an utterance that is based on a wrong assumption is met by an appropriate complement use of ‘we’, a plural subject may come into being. A ‘we’ is *full-blooded* if and only if its utterance implies the existence of a plural subject but is not tendentious (Gilbert 1989, 178).

While these are non-standard uses, they also involve plural subjects: They imply their existence, they suggest their coming into being or they actually bring them about. Thus, these non-standard uses are well integrated within the plural subject account of ‘we’.

Finally, Gilbert lists four constraints for the use of ‘we’ (Gilbert 1989, 174–175): Users of ‘we’ include themselves in the respective referent of ‘we’ (*self-inclusion constraint*); more than one thing is being referred to (*multiplicity constraint*); the things referred to are animate beings (*animacy constraint*); users of ‘we’ must be able to tell, at least in outline, which other animate beings they intend to refer to (*specified range constraint*).

To sum up, the main tenet of the plural subject account of ‘we’ is that ‘we’ standardly refers to a plural subject or is used to establish one. If this central claim is true, Gilbert’s four constraints are fulfilled. For a plural subject comprises several specific animated beings. It also explains why the use of ‘we’ conveys the sense of intimacy and closeness diagnosed by Gilbert, and it explains why we-sentences are at times reproached where matching sentences using ‘you and I’ are not. In sum, Gilbert holds the following four claims:

- (i) The pronoun ‘we’ is ambiguous in that there is a distributive and a collective ‘we’.
- (ii) In the collective sense, ‘we’ refers to an existing or anticipated plural subject.
- (iii) Evidence for (ii) is the particular sense of intimacy and closeness conveyed by the use of ‘we’.
- (iv) The use of ‘we’ is regulated by four constraints, namely the constraints of multiplicity, self-inclusion, animacy, and specified range.

I will argue against claims (i), (ii) and (iii) in the three subsections of section 3 and turn to claim (iv) in section 4.

In a way, Gilbert's plural subject account of 'we' can be considered to be a special version of the plurality account, adding to the latter a claim about the ontological nature of the pluralities referred to. Nevertheless, I will use the term 'plurality account' to exclude the plural subject account, referring to the original version of the plurality account without any restriction on the pluralities involved. As Gilbert's account adds to the plurality account, it is not surprising that there are several consensual points between the plurality approach I sketched above and Gilbert's plural subject account. First, both accounts treat 'we' as a referring expression whose reference can only be determined in the context of utterance. Second, there is a consensus that the role of 'we' cannot be simply seen as 'I' in the plural. Third, many followers of the plurality account will hold some variant of Gilbert's constraints; they are certainly shared by Nunberg (1993) and de Bruin (2009). However, I will show that the linguistic record is much more varied than such a uniform picture insinuates, and that the plurality account is in much better shape to deal with this variety.

3. Problems for the Plural Subject Account

3.1. *There are no Collective Noun Phrases*

I begin my critical assessment of the plural subject account with a closer look at Gilbert's alleged 'collective we'. The collective–distributive contrast can be illustrated by the following two sentences:

- (2) a. We play Harp patience.
 b. We play a string quintet.

As a rule, one plays patience by oneself,⁷ whereas it needs five to play a quintet. The sentence (2a) reports about several actions of the same type (playing Harp patience) with one participant each, while sentence (2b) reports one action (an instance of playing a string quartet) with several participants.⁸ In the case of sentence

7 The source of my example is, of course, Wittgenstein's *Philosophische Untersuchungen* § 248. Bertram Kienzle has pointed out to me that some varieties of patience are played by two players, like the Russian Bank. Harp patience is standardly played by a single player.

8 Cf. Brooks 1981, 115.

(2a), the plural predication can be dissolved in favour of several singular predications (3a), while the pseudo-sentence (3b) shows that this does not work with (2b):⁹

- (3) a. I play patience and you play patience and he plays patience etc.
 b. *I play a quartet and you play a quartet and he plays a quartet etc.

For this reason, (2a) is said to have a *distributive* reading, while (2b) has a *collective* reading. While (2a) and (2b) are quite unambiguous because of the action types reported on, other sentences can take on both meanings. Sentence (4a), for example, can take on both (4b) and (4c) as its meaning:¹⁰

- (4) a. We drank a bottle of beer.
 b. We both drank a bottle of beer each (adding up to two bottles).
 c. We drank a bottle of beer together (adding up to one bottle).

It is clear that (4a) features an ambiguity on the sentence level. It may, however, be disputed what lies at the root of this ambiguity. Sometimes the contrast between the collective and the distributive meaning is explained as a contrast in (implicit) quantification. If we translate (4b) and (4c) in Davidson style into first-order logic, quantifying over events (Davidson 1967/1980), it becomes clear that (4b) reports several events of drinking a bottle of beer, but that (4c) reports one such event only that has several participants. The result is that (4b) translates into (5a), where the existential quantor, ranging over events, is within the scope of the universal quantor, ranging over participants. In contrast, (4c) translates into (5b), where quantifiers relate the other way round (G_{we} being the set of people referred to by ‘we’):

- (5) a. $\forall x (x \in G_{we} \rightarrow \exists e (e \text{ is a drinking-a-bottle-of-beer} \vee x \text{ participates in } e))$
 b. $\exists e \forall x (x \in G_{we} \rightarrow (e \text{ is a drinking-a-bottle-of-beer} \vee x \text{ participates in } e))$

However, this cannot be the whole story. First, the collective–distributive contrast extends beyond action sentences, as is evidenced by (6):

- 9 I follow the convention to mark a pseudo-example with an asterisk (*) and a dubious case with a question mark (?).
 10 Interestingly, the disambiguation in (4c) is not a perfect one. It could well be that all participants had their own bottle, but they drank these together, as in: ‘Each of us bought a bottle of beer, and we drank them together.’

- (6) a. We weigh more than 500 kg.
 b. We can carry the piano.
 c. As a committee, we are the representation of medical students.

Applying the Davidsonian approach to these sentences would require an ontological commitment to individual qualities (6a), individual dispositions (6b), and individual social functions (6c)—which might be admissible for some, but too high a price to be paid for others.

In contrast, Gilbert opts for an ambiguity in the noun phrase ‘we’. But this would lead into trouble, as the collective–distributive contrast can occur with just any noun phrase in the plural, as in (7):

- (7) a. The three judges wrote their opinions.
 b. The students wrote a short story.

How many opinions and how many short stories were written? We cannot tell without context. Nevertheless, it would not be reasonable to talk about two meanings of ‘the three judges’, ‘the students’, and virtually every plural noun. This would lead to uneconomic lexicography, as two entries for the plural for every noun would be needed in the dictionary. For this reason, I prefer to distinguish between distributive and collective predication as two kinds of plural predication, both acting on pluralities. This finds further corroboration by sentences like the following:

- (8) a. We planned to go on strike and were then fired for it.
 b. We play the piece again—first alone, then together.

Both of these sentences combine a collective and a distributive predication with the same token of the pronoun ‘we’. If there was an ambiguity in the noun phrase, these sentences would be like puns. But they aren’t. They are perfectly well-formed and meaningful sentences of the English language. Hence, it must be concluded that there is no such ambiguity.

To be sure, this does not exclude the possibility that there *could* be different forms of pronouns or nouns to be used in combination with distributive or collective predications, respectively. In a language with such pronouns, constructions like (8) would not be possible.

I have not found a language with such pronouns. But Corbett uses the terms ‘collective’ and ‘distributive’ to discuss a special morphological marking of nouns (not of pronouns) occurring in certain languages (Corbett 2000,

111–120). The meaning conveyed by these noun forms might be related to the present distinction between collective and distributive predication, as it can comprise the contrast between ‘a pair of F’ and ‘two F’. But it can also comprise the contrast between ‘of the same kind’ vs ‘from the same place’, and also the contrast between ‘of different kinds’ vs ‘from different places’ on the other. These distinctions are clearly orthogonal to the collective–distributive contrast that is at stake here.

In any case, such a morphological marking of nouns and pronouns would only reflect a difference in predication, not a difference in reference: Just any plurality could be the referent of both the collective and the distributive form. Hence, the distinction between a ‘collective we’ and a ‘distributive we’ breaks down. There are rather two modes of predication, a collective mode and a distributive mode, and the same ‘we’ can be the subject to any of these two modes.¹¹

If the collective–distributive contrast is rooted in different modes of predication, this fits well with the fact that we can disambiguate between the different modes of predication by means of adverbs like ‘together’, ‘collectively’ or ‘jointly’—or, on the distributive side, by adverbs like ‘alone’, ‘seperately’, ‘serverally’ or ‘singly’. This is, then, a severe problem for the plural subject account, as it is now no longer possible to justify an account exclusively for the alleged ‘collective we’ and exclude the alleged ‘distributive we’ from the phenomena to be explained.

3.2. *Beyond Plural Subjects*

The main tenet of the plural subject account of ‘we’ is that the central sense of the pronoun ‘we’ is to refer to a plural subject. As exceptions to this rule, Gilbert recognizes only the tendentious or initiatory ways of use, whose point is to bring a plural subject into existence:

[... ‘we’] may be used as if it is already entirely appropriate, when it is not. Someone could use it in this way in an effort to bring the conditions for its appropriateness into being; and it could be an effective tool in such a project. (Gilbert 1989, 178)

- 11 Friends of the Lamda operator can easily turn the analysis suggested in (6) into matching predicates that can be attributed to the respective groups:
- (6*) a. $\lambda G. \forall x \in G \exists e (e \text{ is a drinking-a-bottle-of-beer} \vee x \text{ participates in } e)(G)$
 b. $\lambda G. \exists e \forall x \in G (e \text{ is a drinking-a-bottle-of-beer} \vee x \text{ participates in } e)(G)$

A clear example for such a use is, e.g., (9a):

- (9) a. Shall we dance?
- b. We wanted to dance the last waltz together.

In contrast, according to the Gilbertian picture, sentence (9b) already presupposes that there is a plural subject with a joint commitment to waltz together, while in sentence (9a) there is no such presupposition: As said before, the ‘we’ may express a sense of intimacy, but there is no presupposition of a plural subject for the action of dancing. Hence, sentence (9a) is a clear case of an initiatory use of ‘we’ to establish a plural subject for a certain dance, though it is not clear whether the prospective dancers already form a plural subject for something else or not. E.g., if the prospective dancers are engaged, they form at least a plural subject for the action of getting married. There are, however, cases in which ‘we’ is used neither to refer to a plural subject nor to establish one, as the following examples show:

- (10) a. We humans are too many.
- b. We humans have always been mortal.

One should not be disturbed by the fact that the plural pronoun here occurs together with an accompanying noun (‘humans’). This accompanying noun can be replaced through an anaphoric indication of the intended reference, as in (10a), or it can be eliminated in favour of a predication (‘are humans’) as in (10b):

- (11) a. Humanity has outgrown any admissible size. We are too many.
- b. We are humans, and we have always been mortal.

These two examples cover both distributive and collective predications. In sentence (10b), mortality is attributed distributively to each and every human. Sentence (10a), however, would not make any sense on a distributive reading: It is the plurality of all presently living humans that, as a plurality, has too many members. Thus, ‘we’ in (10a) refers to a synchronic group, the group of all humans that live now. In sentence (10b), however, ‘we’ refers to all humans that ever existed, i.e., to a diachronic group (Jansen 2005; 2017, ch. 12).

Gilbert’s plural subject account of ‘we’ does not account for these sentences. Her claim could be saved by declaring these uses of ‘we’ less central than those uses where it refers to a plural subject. But this would seem to be an *ad hoc* move for which there is no independent justification. In the absence of such a

justification, the use of ‘we’ in sentences (10a) and (10b) seem to be as central as the plural subject uses.

The canonical role of ‘we’ is to refer to a plurality to which the sender belongs. These pluralities may have established plural subjects, but they need not. There may be joint commitments in the plurality in question, but the existence of joint commitments among the plurality in question is not implied by the use of ‘we’: There are, e.g., no joint commitments fusing together the whole of humankind. While this is already plausible for humankind in its synchronic extent (10a), it is even more plausible when it comes to humankind in its diachronic extent (10b). Gilbert’s alleged initiatory use of ‘we’, thus, finds a new explanation: There is no need to assume that some first-person plural pronouns refer to anticipated future plural subjects, which are at that time merely possible entities. Instead, what Gilbert sees as the anticipation of a merely possible plural subject is rather a reference to an actually existing plurality that is meant to turn into a plural subject.

3.3. *The Alleged Intimacy of ‘We’*

Gilbert’s strongest argument for the plural subject account of ‘we’ is the possibility of different reactions to speech acts phrased in the first person plural as opposed to speech acts using the singular pronouns ‘you’ and ‘I’. Gilbert develops this view by distilling criteria for an appropriate use of ‘we’:

In saying ‘Shall we do A?’ X may use the full-blooded ‘we’ with regard to himself, Y, and Z, if and only if each of X, Y, and Z is willing to share in doing A with the others in circumstances of the type at issue, and each one knows this as a result of each one’s having, in effect, expressed this willingness to each of the others. (Gilbert 1989, 185)

This is not Gilbert’s ultimate formulation, but the last one without too many technical terms.

The plural subject account of ‘we’ is able to give an explanation for the sense of intimacy that seems to be connected with the pronoun ‘we’ and the respective criteria for its appropriate use. However, explanatory appeal is no guarantee for truth. I will argue that, first, the sense of intimacy is far from being a general feature of ‘we’, as relevant uses of ‘we’ do not come along with this sense of unity. Second, the inappropriateness of the respective speech acts does not depend on the use of ‘we’ at all. Hence, the pronoun ‘we’ is not the source of inappropriateness sought for.

Gilbert's diagnosis of intimacy, closeness and potential inappropriateness suffers in part from a one-sided diet of examples. She discusses in detail situations of small groups with face-to-face communication, and the design of her examples mostly implies the inclusive use of 'we'. Change the examples, and the sense of intimacy and closeness disappears:

- (12) a. We never met before.
 b. We have nothing in common.
 c. We do not know each other.
 d. We never felt close to each other.
 e. We don't have any business with each other.
 f. When we meet, I miss this sense of unity, closeness and intimacy.
 g. We are no plural subject.

All these sentences are grammatically correct. Uttering them is no pun; there is no tension in the semantic content of these sentences. It does not matter for the appropriateness of 'we' in these sample sentences whether the 'we' is used inclusively or exclusively. It could be used in both ways. It is not possible to insert a 'together' in these sentences, but neither is it possible in most of these sentences to exchange the 'we' with 'we both', as in 'We are both on this list of names'. Only (12c) and (12d) seem to allow for that substitution. The other sentences in (12) seem to compel those who hold that there is a 'we both' and a 'we together' sense of 'we' to assume a third sense of 'we' that is neither 'we both' nor 'we together'. This clearly shows the limits of the both-together test (cf. Sect. 2.3). Nevertheless, even if these sentences do not allow the 'we together' substitution, they are not mere 'telescoped' predications to single persons. These sentences feature genuine collective plural predications. It is not possible, say, to rephrase the first example thus:

- (13) *I have never met before and you have never met before etc.

Hence, we have examples of the use of 'we' in collective plural predications that do not feature the sense of intimacy and closeness that Gilbert attributes to the 'full-blooded' use of 'we', and hence the appropriateness of the use in such sentences is subject to much weaker criteria.

But even in those cases where we have the sense of intimacy that is diagnosed by Gilbert, the pronoun 'we' is not necessarily responsible for it. Gilbert points out that her thesis about the appropriateness of the use of 'we' contains two preconditions for the 'semantically responsible' use of the pronoun 'we': the

actual readiness and its expression on the side of all members (1989, 183). Of course, a mere expression of readiness could be insincere and mere lip service. In order to sustain the necessity of the actual readiness as opposed to the mere expression, she invites us to consider the following story: Suppose that an acquaintance of mine expresses his willingness to play chess with me. Later, I learn from a mutual friend that the acquaintance is in fact no chess-player at all and very much ashamed of his insincerity. Gilbert suggests that, given this background, it would be odd for me to ask him ‘Shall we play chess?’ despite his explicit expression of his readiness to do so (Gilbert 1989, 184). Gilbert admits that ‘it would be odd for many reasons’. One such reason would be that I can already have a justified assumption about his reaction, or that I must assume that he would be quite ashamed if I ask him to play chess with me. However, according to Gilbert’s analysis, ‘part of the oddness’ is that it would be ‘semantically irresponsible’ for me to use the pronoun ‘we’ because I already know that he does actually possess no willingness to play chess at all.

On closer inspection, however, the oddness of such a question has nothing to do with the use of the pronoun ‘we’. It would be just as odd for me to phrase my request using other pronouns, e.g., by saying: ‘Would you play chess with me?’ The reaction of my acquaintance would be as predictable as in the former case, and the request would be as embarrassing for my acquaintance. It is, hence, not the ‘we’ that causes the inappropriateness—which thus must have a different source. Otherwise, as de Bruin (2009, 254) nicely points out, we should also expect people correcting our use of pronouns. But while dialogues consisting out of something like (14) may sometimes be heard in trains, this is not the case for (15) (both taken from de Bruin 2009, 254):

- (14) a. She has been lucky to find a seat!
b. Well, it is ‘he’, not ‘she’.
- (15) a. We have been lucky to find seats!
b. Well, it is ‘you and I’, not ‘we’.

I have, thus, shown that points (i)–(iii) of my summary of Gilbert’s claims (Sect. 2.3) cannot be uphold. First, there is no ambiguity between a distributive and a collective ‘we’, but only a distinction between two different modes of predication. Hence, any account of ‘we’ has to account for occurrences of ‘we’ with both modes of predication, which is easy for the plurality account but nearly impossible for the plural subject account. Second, there are many instances of ‘we’, even in sentences with collective predication, which do not refer to plural subjects. Again, this can easily be accommodated by the plural-

ity account. Finally, the sense of intimacy that Gilbert cites as evidence for her plural subject account must have a different source than the alleged fact that ‘we’ centrally refers to a plural subject, as the problem may also arise with other linguistic means like the conjunctive phrase ‘you and I’. I will now turn to point (iv) on my list, i.e., the constraints on the use of ‘we’ which Gilbert postulates.

4. Checking the Constraints With the Linguistic Record

Gilbert postulates four constraints on the use of pronouns of the first person plural. I begin by questioning the completeness of Gilbert’s list of constraints (§ 4.1) and then turn to discuss the items actually on Gilbert’s list of constraints. I discuss counterexamples against the multiplicity constraint (§ 4.2), against the specified-range constraint (§ 4.3), against the self-inclusion constraint (§ 4.4), and finally against the animacy constraint (§ 4.4). The arguments brought forward in this section are no conclusive evidence against the plural subject account, and indeed many holders of the plurality account may want to subscribe to similar constraints. Nevertheless, I argue that the plurality account does better in accommodating the linguistic data. There is a lot of linguistic literature that bears witness of the large variety in human language. There are comparative studies of number (Corbett 2000), comparative studies of the category of person (Forchheimer 1953, Cysouw 2001) or pronominal systems (Wiesemann 1986), next to literature on personal pronouns in single languages like English (like Wales 1995). A graphic overview can be found in the *World Atlas of Language Structures Online* (Dryer/Haspelmath 2013), which has several chapters relevant for the present topic (Cysouw 2013a, 2013b, Siewierska 2013).

4.1. Possible Need for Additional Constraints

Looking at linguistic diversity, it is often surprising to see differences marked in languages that are not marked in one’s own language, or the other way round. Comparative analyses can thus often uncover ambiguities that might otherwise go unnoticed. In the English language (as in, e.g., German or French), ‘we’ is the only pronoun of the first person plural and is used for any plurality, disregarding any differences there may be between pluralities. Other languages have two or more pronouns where English has only ‘we’. These languages mark differences that go unmarked in English (and maybe even unnoticed by speak-

ers of English). In these languages, that is, there are pronouns with canonical roles that are more fine-grained than the canonical roles of English pronouns. Typical dimensions of such fine-graining are the grammatical phenomena of gender, number, and what is called clusivity and vicinity.

I start with clusivity, i.e., the contrast between the inclusive and the exclusive use of a pronoun. Gilbert is quite right in regarding it as a 'parochial fact about English that it has not two words to distinguish the case where the person addressed (if there is one) is included in the referent of 'we' from the case where he or she is not included' (Gilbert 1989, 174). English, that is, does not mark the distinction between an inclusive and an exclusive first person plural. Seen from the communication model for the canonical roles of personal pronouns, there are two options in the plural: First, senders can intend to include themselves in the group referred to or not. Second, senders can intend to include the addressee in the group referred to or not. This yields two times two possible combinations, while there are only three plural pronouns in English. The reason is that English 'we' occupies two of these slots: It can include addressees, but it can also exclude them. Hence, there is an important underdetermination of the English 'we', insofar it is not explicitly marked whether it is used inclusively or exclusively: The inclusive 'we' includes the addressee while the exclusive form does not include the addressee.

While the exclusive 'we' refers to a plurality that includes at least the speaker and someone that is neither speaker and addressee, the inclusive 'we' refers to a plurality that includes at least the speaker and the addressee. With the inclusive 'we', two cases can be distinguished. First, the plurality referred to may consist exactly of the speaker and the addressee; this is then the 'minimal inclusive we' (or: the 'inclusive we' in the dual). Second, the plurality may consist of the speaker, the addressee and one or more plurality members which are neither speaker nor addressee. This is, then, the 'augmented inclusive we'. Cysouw reports as a result of a major comparative study that there is a huge variety of patterns on which of these fine-grained roles are marked or not marked (Cysouw 2001, 2012). English 'we' is used invariably for all of these roles.

When it comes to number distinctions, many languages are much more varied than English. They do not only allow distinguishing between singular on the one hand and plural on the other, but they may have special forms for pluralities with two (dual) or three persons (trial). Some languages seem even to have a special form for four persons (quadral) or few persons (paucal), while some note that it is difficult to distinguish between these two (Corbett 2000, 25–27). The independent pronouns in the Austronesian language Lihir, for example, exhibit a quadral/paucal next to a dual and a trial, as do the em-

phatic pronouns in the Oceanic language Sursurunga (Corbett's tables 2.2 and 2.4).

Grammatical gender is mostly irrelevant for English pronouns, with the one exception of the third person singular. However, many languages have gender distinctions in the other persons. In Spanish, for example, there are different forms of 'we' for pluralities with at least one male member, and purely female pluralities. While in English it is indiscriminately 'we men' and 'we women', it is 'nosotros caballeros' (= we [masc. pl.] gentlemen) but 'nosotras mujeres' (= we [fem. pl.] women) in Spanish. Things become more complex when we consider possible combinations of gender with number and clusivity. A particularly impressive example is Korana, a language spoken in South Africa, which 'has gender distinctions [male, female and common gender] for all three persons in three numbers [singular, dual and plural] and in both the exclusive and inclusive forms in the dual and plural' (Siewierska 2013).

Some languages also mark the vicinity of the members of the plurality referred to. E.g. the Micronesian language Moki distinguishes between pluralities of near members and pluralities of remote members, where remoteness can be understood in spatial or social terms (Corbett 2000, 34).

English 'we' is neutral with respect to all of these distinctions. It is thus underdetermined in regard to these dimensions. From the point of view of other languages, that is, it is not clear from the beginning which pronoun is needed to translate the English 'we'.

The fine-grained roles discussed so far match grammatical categories actually explicitly marked in other known languages. One could also distinguish fine-grained roles that are not explicitly marked in any language. In analogy to the marking of spatial or social vicinity, one could, e.g., mark whether 'we' refers to synchronic or diachronic pluralities. For synchronic pluralities, all members exist at the same time, while for diachronic pluralities there is no time at which all members exist (Sect. 3.2), as in the following examples. This is a further feature with respect to which the English 'we' is underdetermined:

- (16) a. Last week we all met for lunch.
 b. Since 800 years we celebrate mass in this chapel.

It might be objected that these are more or less artificial distinctions, which must not be overrated. However, most of these distinctions are actually marked and distinguished in other languages. Note that there are also distinctions marked in English that are not marked in other languages. E.g., several languages do not have different forms for the singular and the plural of the first

person (Cysouw 2013a, map feature 39A). A prominent example is the Amazonian language Pirahã that does not have any special plural forms for personal pronouns. In Pirahã, either the same forms are used for singular and plural, or a combination of pronouns ('you and I') is used (Everett 1986, 280 as quoted in Corbett 2000, 50–51). I imagine that this feels like everybody uses the majestic plural in order to refer to him- or herself, and not only kings, doctors, and editors. I will have more to say about the majestic plural in the next section. Here it suffices to say that the existence of the majestic plural could indeed be a reason for regarding English itself as one of the languages that do not clearly distinguish between the first person singular and plural (Sect. 4.2). Standard English has a number syncretism in the second person; 'you' is used indiscriminately in both singular and plural.¹² However, none of this makes the distinction between singular and plural an artificial one. The distinction between one and many does still hit on something in the world.

In any case, both the plurality account and the plural subject account seem to be flexible enough to accommodate reference to the special groups that can be distinguished along the dimensions discussed in this section by adding further constraints on the plurality referred to. E.g., it has to consist of females only, or to include at least one male (gender); it has to include two, three or a few people (number); or it has to include or exclude the addressee (clusivity). The plurality (or plural subject) referred to by the Spanish pronoun 'nosotros', for example, needs to have at least one male member, and so on. Nevertheless, the existence of more than one first-person pronoun in other languages shows that Gilbert's list of constraints may need different supplementations for any of these pronouns. It also shows that no set of constraints from one language can naively be transposed to other languages, as these may mark different fine-grained roles.

4.2. *Non-plural Uses of 'We'*

I will now turn to an objection to the multiplicity constraint. Often, 'we' is used in a singular meaning. These uses of 'we' and its cognates are commonly referred to as the royal or majestic plural (*pluralis maiestatis*), the plural of modesty (*pluralis modestiae*), or the authorial plural (*pluralis auctoris*). Other current terms for such non-plural uses are the 'editorial we' and the 'doctor we',

12 The old pronouns 'thou' (singular) and 'ye' (plural) are unambiguous but only rarely used today. Cf. Eckersley/Eckersley 1960, 99; Quirk et al. 1979, 208; Walker 2007.

and it is not always clear whether these uses should be regarded as instances of the majestic or the modest plural.¹³ Here are some examples:

- (17) a. The King: ‘We, King of this Realm, make known that ...’
- b. The doctor: ‘How are we today?’
- c. In a single-authored paper: ‘We will argue ... We will learn ...’
- d. The veterinarian: ‘We have a slight injury at the right hind leg.’

In none of these examples is ‘we’ used with a plural meaning; it is used to refer to a single person. This is most evident in the case of the ‘royal we’, in which regents speak about themselves as bearers of an eminent office. In these cases, the ‘we’ could be replaced by an ‘I’ without semantic loss. The ‘royal we’ in (17a) could be seen as a very stately way to talk about oneself, similar to the use of plural forms as formal addresses for single persons, like the German honorific ‘Sie’, which is closely related to the third person plural ‘sie’ (Corbett 2000, 220–223; Helmbrecht 2013). At least, these uses retain the role of referring to the first person, whereas the ‘doctoral we’ also disposes of this part of the canonical role. The doctor in (17b) does not ask about his own condition, as this is already known to him. Rather, he asks about the condition of the patient to which the question is addressed. Thus, in this case ‘we’ takes on the role of the second person singular. The ‘authorial we’ in (17c) can cover both roles: It is, of course, the author himself who wants to argue for a certain thesis (‘I want to argue’), but it is the reader who will learn something (‘You will learn’). Finally, the veterinarian in (17d) is neither talking about his own nor about the addressee’s hind leg. He is not addressing the dog, but its master. Here, thus, ‘we’ takes on the role of the third person singular.

Hence, in a semantic perspective, ‘we’ is not always used as a plural pronoun. Thus, it does not always refer to a plurality, nor to a plural subject. The English pronoun ‘we’ can, as these examples show, also play the role of the first, second or third person singular, thus infringing on the multiplicity constraint.

4.3. *Non-Self-Including Uses*

Some of the non-plural uses discussed in the last section infringe, of course, not only on the multiplicity constraint but also on the self-inclusion constraint. This is trivially the case when ‘we’ plays the role of the second or third person

13 Cf. Wales 1995, 63 (with reference to Wales 1980). Gilbert 1989, 174 mentions the ‘royal we’, but only to preclude it from her discussion.

singular, and though the speakers refer to themselves when using a ‘royal we’, they do not refer to a plural subject or plurality in which they include themselves.

Infringement of the self-inclusion constraint is, however, possible without the infringement of the multiplicity constraint. E.g., in special cases of the ‘doctoral we’, the pronoun can also take on the role of the second and third person plural. The doctor may use it when entering a mother-baby room after delivery; or she may use it when entering a room with several patients, addressing them all at once. In these cases, she can address several people together, thus using ‘we’ as a substitute for plural ‘you’. Moreover, ‘we’ can substitute ‘they’. E.g., the doctor in (17b) could address the nurse to inquire about a group of patients, or the spoil-sport might say with respect to a joyful group, ‘Oh we are having fun today’.

Another group of cases has found much resonance in the literature on social ontology. It is the case of dissidents, i.e., of members of groups that do not participate in the group activity (Baier 1997, 26; Schmid 2005, § 6). Gilbert herself discusses the example of Astrid, ‘an invalid who stayed at home while her country’s army won an important battle against an aggressor’. Astrid can proudly say ‘We won the battle’, although she was personally unable to fight in the trenches (Gilbert 2014, 385; cf. Gilbert 2006, 242).

- (18) a. We are dancing, but I have a broken leg.
 b. We are planning an atomic war, but I am a pacifist.
 c. We are now opposed to Trotsky, but I still admire him.

In such cases as in (18), the speaker at the same time seems to include and exclude herself from the plurality in question. The speaker includes herself into a certain group, but excludes herself from the very group activity, group plan, or group belief. Gilbert has an answer to this challenge. According to Gilbert, what a person is committed to, qua being a member of a plural subject, can differ from what the speaker is committed to personally. Hence, a speaker might be a member of a plural subject of dancing, but not actually fulfilling this commitment. Or she might be a member of a plural subject for despising Trotsky, but personally still valuing him. Hence, utterances of the form ‘We *F*, but I do not *F*’ can be true in virtue of the contrast between joint commitments and actions on the one hand, and individual actions and intentions on the other hand. To avoid a paradox in the case of the dissenter, something needs to constitute the plurality in question beyond the very group action or group intention that is not joined in by the dissenter. On the plural subject

view, the joint commitment is easy at hand to fill this role. It is an advantage of the plurality view that it is not restricted to joint commitments to do this job. Other features may serve this purpose as well, including quite arbitrary ones (Sect. 5; Jansen 2017, chs. 3–6).

4.4. *Reference to Non-Animated Things*

On some occasions, ‘we’ is used to refer to pluralities including non-animated things, maybe even exclusively:

- (19) a. My umbrella and I, we never part.
 b. Toys in the *Nutcracker*: ‘With you we will go to war.’

In (19a), the plurality includes at least one animated thing, namely the speaker. It is probably not the intention of the speaker to imply that her umbrella is a living being. More probably, ‘we’ is used jokingly here, in order to signal her attachment to the unanimated artefact. In (19b), a toy is speaking to other toys, hence an unanimated thing speaking to other unanimated things—if we see things factually. Factually, toys are unanimated. Nevertheless, E. T. A. Hoffmann’s story *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* imagines toys to act just like animated, even intelligent, beings: They speak and they listen; they have emotions and hopes; they make plans and execute them. Hence, the plurality may include unanimated things, but the (imagined) speakers of we-clauses must at least be (imagined to be) animated beings. Technical devices aside, it is not possible that something is thought to be the speaker of any sentence, without ascribing to it some animated behaviour, as speaking itself is a prototypical behaviour of animated entities. Nevertheless, it is possible that the speaker is the only animated being in the plurality referred to by ‘we’.

4.5. *A Non-Referring Use?*

There is even a use of ‘we’ where it is not clear whether there is any particular reference at all. This is the so-called ‘vague we’, i.e., the use of ‘we’ as an impersonal pronoun (Kitagawa/Lehrer 1990), as in the following examples:

- (20) a. Using compass and edge, we can construct a regular pentagon.
 b. We are to make the world a better place.

In these sentences, no reference to a plurality is involved, nor is there a reference to any specific plurality: Everybody could construct the pentagon, and everyone is to make the world a better place. Hence, in these sentences the pronoun ‘we’ could be replaced by the indefinite pronoun ‘one’ or the quantifier ‘everybody’. Then, instead of reference, we have a universal quantification as in (21a)—and no expression referring to a plural subject or a plurality remains:

- (21) a. For all x : x can construct a regular pentagon.
 b. For all $x \in G_{we}$: x can construct a regular pentagon.

On closer inspection, (21a) is too general to be true, because there are things that are not able to construct pentagons, like stones or mushrooms. Hence, it is necessary to re-introduce a reference to a plurality referred to by ‘we’ that excludes these trivial cases. It is tempting to say that the ‘vague we’ in (20) refers to the whole of humankind. However, as intelligent Martians would also be subject to the laws of geometry and morality, they could also be included in the occurrences of ‘we’ in (20), giving it the extension of, say, all rational beings. An addressee cannot know whom the speaker meant to include—and addressees do not really have to know the exact extension of the ‘vague we’. Moreover, even the speaker does not have to know this. Speakers may use the ‘indefinite we’ without knowing the exact extension of the ‘we’. Hence the ‘indefinite we’ is a clear challenge to the specified range constrain. In addition, neither humankind nor the group of all rational beings are plural subjects. Hence, the ‘vague we’ also corroborates the plurality account.

4.6. Assessment

Taken together, these examples yield an impressive list of non-canonical roles, which ‘we’ can take on. In fact, that is, ‘we’ can take on the role of virtually all other personal pronouns including the indefinite ‘one’. None of Gilbert’s constraints for the use of ‘we’ remains unchallenged in the light of these samples. The ‘doctor we’ and related phenomena in (17) do not satisfy the multiplicity constraint. The veterinarian example (17d) and the phenomenon of dissidents in (18) challenge the self-inclusion constraint, samples (19) challenge the animacy constraint, and the indefinite or vague uses of ‘we’ in (20) challenge the specified range constraint.

It may seem attractive to keep such constraints as a specification of a stan-

dard use of ‘we’. But even then, the plurality account can better deal with the variety of the linguistic record than the plural subject account. For the plurality of the speaker and her umbrella does not form a plural subject. How could it, given that umbrellas are unable to signal any readiness for joint actions? And whatever, if anything, the indefinite or vague ‘we’ in (20) refers to, be it humankind or the realm of all rational beings, these are no plural subjects either.

On first sight, the singular uses, like the ‘doctor we’, seem to challenge plural subject account and plurality account alike. It is, though, quite popular to assume that even the seemingly singular uses of ‘we’ involve a reference to a plurality. Maybe the single author using the ‘authorial we’ wants to integrate his reader into his work? E.g., Quirk and colleagues suggest: ‘*We* seeks to identify the writer and the reader as involved in a joint enterprise [...].’ (Quirk et al. 1979, 208, § 4.112). Similarly, Eckersley and Eckersley comment on the ‘editorial we’ that, perhaps, the editor ‘feels that he is speaking not only for himself but for the whole board of management of the paper’ (Eckersley and Eckersley 1960, 99) And Bell suggests that the plural of modesty identifies the orator ‘with the people, class, or craft to which he belongs’ (Bell 1923, 74; cf. Corbett 2000, 221; Schmid 2005, 12)—or, alternatively, with his audience (Bell 1923, 75).

These are speculations. However, were these speculations true, they would be further detriment to the plural subject account, because these pluralities need not be plural subjects. The doctor may use ‘we’ even when she speaks to a patient for the first time, having treated him for days after he went into a coma due to an accident. The author has no joint commitment with his reader, nor are the classes or crafts of orators normally plural subjects.

However, the speculations could simply be wrong. Maybe the doctor using the ‘doctoral we’ perceives of himself and his patient as a team whose goal it is to restore the patient’s health and well-being. But maybe he does not. The author and the doctor may as well follow linguistic conventions for their particular communicative situation without thinking much about the teams they may or may not form. Even the editor of a one-man newspaper may use the ‘editorial we’. In any case, such speculations are misleading with regard to the reference of ‘we’. For it is the patient who is ill, and not the team consisting of doctor and patient. The author of a paper does not want to learn anything, while the reader does not wants to argue for anything, but wants to learn about what the author argues for.

Such speculations thus only badly account for the intentions of current users of ‘we’ in non-canonical roles. However, similar speculations may be more successful to reflect the history of such uses. Wales suggests that ‘the use of

“authorial we” presumably arose from a desire to be neither too personal nor too impersonal, and to suggest modesty of achievement of a kind associated with joint authorship’ (Wales 1995, 65). Corbett notes that the plural can serve both as a marker of respect and modesty (Corbett 2000, 221); and Bell suggests that the plural of majesty ‘seems to arise from the principle of collegiality in office so usual in Greece and Rome’ (Bell 1923, 75). This would explain why ‘we’ carries the connotations that are usually accredited to these non-canonical uses, i.e., modesty, authority or distance.

This comes down to the claim that the non-canonical roles somehow derive from the canonical role, which is then historically prior to the non-canonical roles. Sometimes this is expressed by calling non-canonical roles ‘parasitic’ (Schmid 2005, 11)—no doubt a move to downplay their relevance. But indeed, understanding of non-canonical uses can be embedded within standard pragmatics through certain inference patterns on the side of the addressee. In the case of the ‘doctor we’, for example, the patient may reason as follows:

Well, the doctor literally asks for the well-being of a plurality. As pluralities have no well-being in the strict sense, it is unlikely that she asks for a collective well-being. Hence, she asks for the well-being of the individual members of the plurality in question. The members of the plurality she asks for are, presumably, she herself and myself. As she already knows about her own well-being, there is no point in asking me about it. Thus, it is more than likely that she inquires about my own well-being.

There is no need that the plurality in question is a plural subject, nor that the addressee assumes that it is a plural subject, nor that the addressee assumes that the speaker refers to a plural subject or intends to establish one. Hence, also in this pragmatic respect, the plurality account fares better than the plural subject account.¹⁴

5. A Multi-Layered Ontology of Groups

In this paper, I have argued for a plurality account of the first person plural: The canonical role of the pronoun ‘we’, and of plural pronouns in general, is to refer to certain pluralities. These pluralities, or so I have argued against

14 Nunberg 1993 and de Bruin 2009 do not discuss non-plural uses like the ‘doctor we’, but Nunberg’s view that ‘we’, like ‘I’, is essentially an index to the speaker of the utterance, could accommodate the non-plural uses along similar patterns of reasoning on behalf of the addressee.

Margaret Gilbert, need not be plural subjects, and often they are none. The plurality account is in touch with the canonical roles ascribed to ‘we’ by grammarians and competent speakers, and it can accommodate fine-grained roles of plural pronouns in other languages. Not only can it deal with the whole range of collective predications, but also with distributive predications. Moreover, within the plurality account, we do not have to assume special tendentious or initiatory uses of ‘we’, nor do we have to ascribe reference to future—and thus merely possible—plural subjects. The plurality account also deals better with the non-canonical roles of ‘we’. Finally, the sense of intimacy and closeness, as well as the criteria for appropriateness, that Gilbert cites as evidence for the plural subject account, have been shown not to be central even for the use of ‘we’ in collective predications nor to be grounded in the use of the pronoun ‘we’ as opposed to ‘you and I’. Hence, the plurality account fares better or at least as good on all these counts.

Were the plural subject account correct, the sentences in (12) should all appear to be ungrammatical. But they are not. The plurality account can account for this. In turn, on the plurality account, the sentences in (22) should be incoherent. If they are not, it can well be argued that the ‘we’ is then understood in a non-canonical way:

- (22) a. ?We are not more than one.
 b. ?We are not a plurality.

The plurality account can also account for changes in the ontological nature of the plurality referred to. (23) exemplifies this phenomenon:

- (23) a. We accidentally met in the elevator, and are now engaged.
 b. When we were married, we had many affairs.
 c. We were once married, but never met again after our divorce.
 d. When we were walking together, we both got a sunburn.

No doubt, engaged couples are plural subjects—they have a joint commitment for future marriage. So are married couples (often discussed in Gilbert 2014, cf. also Jansen 2014). But people meeting accidentally in the elevator are normally not a plural subject, nor do spouses normally have affairs as part of a joint commitment. Hence, on the plural subject account, in each of the sentences in (23), one of the predicates is properly ascribed to a plural subject, while the other presupposes some other, allegedly non-central use of ‘we’. However, there is no ring of a pun in (23), so there is no indication of a change of use in these

samples. The plurality account does not face this problem. On the plurality account, there is no problem in saying that a number of people at one time is united by a joint commitment, but not at another time. This allows to ascribe predicates to a former plural subject both distributively, as in (23b), and collectively, as in (23c).

I have chosen the technical term ‘plurality’, because the more familiar ‘group’ often carries with it the connotation of a certain unity (Goddard 1995, 107). Pluralities, however, can be quite arbitrary. Any arbitrary aggregate of people is a plurality, whether they exist at the same time or not. One plurality, for example, comprises Aristotle, Kant and me. This plurality is the referent of ‘we’ in the following example (adapted from Goddard 1995, 107):

- (24) a. What do Aristotle, Kant and me have in common? We are philosophers.
 b. We, the members of the set {Aristotle, Kant, me}, are all philosophers.
 c. We, Aristotle, Kant, and I, have written altogether more than 50 books.

Alternative terms for ‘plurality’ are perhaps the phrase ‘a number of people’ or the phrase ‘a set of people’ (used by Goddard 1995, 107), where the latter is ambiguous as it could also refer to an abstract mathematical set having several people as its elements.

Were Gilbert right, it would have a paradoxical ring to say ‘We are no plural subject’ (12g). As it is, there is no such ring. Admittedly, ‘plural subject’ is a term of art to which not many linguistic intuitions are attached. But if I am right, the reason for the lack of paradox is that it is not part of the canonical role of ‘we’ to refer to plural subjects. However, it is part of its canonical role (as described above) to refer to a plurality, and ‘We are no plurality’ does have a paradoxical ring. To be sure, saying so is not grammatically impossible—witness the existence of the ‘royal we’. But it is not what competent speakers would normally expect. And this corroborates my description of the canonical role of the first person plural, i.e., the claim that ‘we’ refers to a plurality that may or may not be a plural subject.

When presenting her view on personal pronouns, Gilbert has been bold and cautious at the same time. She has been bold in putting the plural subject sense centre stage. But she has been cautious in her phrasing. On the one hand, she is sometimes as cautious as to say that the plural subject sense of ‘we’ is ‘a central sense’ (Gilbert 1989, 168 etc.; 2000, 108; my italics) or ‘a standard use’ (Gilbert

2006, 145; again my italics)—which allows there to be other central senses next to the plural subject sense. On the other hand, she is ready to take refuge to the technical term ‘we*’ that always refers to a plural subject. ‘We*’, that is, has exactly the meaning Gilbert ascribes to the English ‘we’ by *fiat*. Now, ‘we*’ is insufficient to explain the meaning of, say, sample sentences (10) and (11), but it is sufficient to explain reference to and establishment of plural subjects. Therefore, as Gilbert notes herself, her general theory of plural subjects is logically independent from her plural subject account of ‘we’ (Gilbert 1989, 168).

Nevertheless, it becomes clear that the plural subject theory accounts only for a small part of the uses of ‘we’. Plural subject theory needs to be embedded in a more general theory of pluralities. A result of this move is a more elegant account both of the functioning of ‘we’ and the ontology of social groups. There are plural subjects, but only because there are pluralities first.

Though pluralities may comprise just everything, what is of interest here are pluralities of humans or of other beings that may be able to form plural subjects—or, in other parlance, social groups. All plural subjects are pluralities, but, trivially, not all pluralities are plural subjects, not even all pluralities of humans. Pluralities can *turn into* plural subjects—by entering into joint commitments. Thus, to take up Gilbert’s example (Sect. 2.3), Tonto was wrong: There was a ‘we’, but this ‘we’ was a mere plurality, not a plural subject. Shrek was wrong, too: For trivial reasons, there is a plurality consisting of Shrek and Donkey. Hence, I propose a two-tier ontology of pluralities or groups in general: There are pluralities and there are plural subjects. Or, as I put it elsewhere: There are collectives of persons, and there are collective persons (Jansen 2017). Despite the ontological diversity of groups, I can stay with a unified description of the canonical role of ‘we’: The canonical role of ‘we’ is to refer to a plurality to which the sender belongs. These pluralities may have established plural subjects, but they need not. There may be joint commitments in the plurality in question, but the existence of joint commitments among the plurality in question is not implied by the use of ‘we’.

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