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Number and person agreement with the subject: Downward Agree *vs* Spec–Head

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Abstract
This paper shows that there are fundamental connections in English between nominals headed by a singular noun of the *committee* type and the singular and plural pronouns *they/them* and *you* with regard to their agreement behaviour for number and person. An analysis of these DPs' internal syntax and the influence of pre- *vs* post-verbal placement on number and person inflection on the verb is presented that capitalises on the difference between downward Agree and Spec–Head agreement. This analysis offers a syntactic representation for 'singular *they/them*' which not only explains its agreement sensitivity to linear placement relative to the finite verb but also four additional properties of this complex pronoun.

Keywords Number · Person · Pronouns · 'singular *they/them*' · 'pluringulars' · Agree · Spec–Head agreement

1 Introduction

When used in gender-neutral reference to a single person,[1] English 'singular *they/them*' (see Bjorkman 2017; Conrod 2019; Konnelly and Cowper 2020; Arregi and Hewett 2024 *i.a.* for recent analytical discussion) is indisputably a pronominal expression. Its distribution matches that of unstressed personal pronouns, and not,

[1]This paper, like Collins (2025), focuses on the use of 'singular *they/them*' with reference to a single nonbinary person (as made explicit by the contexts provided in the questionnaire used for this study; see the Appendix). Epicene *they/them* (referring to an individual whose gender is unknown to the speaker) in all likelihood behaves the same way. The agreement behaviour of the use of *they/them* as a bound variable is not discussed here. (A reviewer points out that for them, *every child knows that what their mother loves most is/*are them* requires *is*; cf. (6b).).

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for instance, that of epithets (*pace* Patel-Grosz 2015; e.g., *the idiot*) or imposters (Collins and Postal 2012; e.g., *Mum*, used by the speaker to refer to herself in conversation with her children; note that *Mum* and *them* are both monosyllabic, with similar rhymes), which unlike weak pronouns can occur to the right of a particle in the English verb–particle construction (1) and cannot occur in question tags (2).

(1) a. (as for Chris,) you should ask ⟨*out⟩ them ⟨out⟩ sometime
b. (as for Chris,) you should ask ⟨out⟩ the bastard/genius/idiot ⟨out⟩ sometime
c. (as for me,) you should ask ⟨out⟩ Mum ⟨out⟩ sometime

(2) a. they are an interesting person, aren't they?
b. *they are an interesting person, isn't the bastard/genius/idiot?
c. *I am an interesting person, isn't Mum?

But even though 'singular *they*/*them*' is pronominal, its agreement behaviour is sensitive to pre- *vs* post-verbal placement in a way that is unlike the behaviour of other pronouns, and more like that of common-noun phrases of the *committee* type ('pluringulars'; den Dikken 2001, Smith 2017). While 'singular *they*' agrees for plural number with the finite verb when it occurs in the structural subject position of a clause (*they* {**is*/*are*} *an interesting person*),[2] it controls singular agreement when post-verbal, in a variety of predicate inversion constructions and in *there* sentences, as Collins (2025) shows. A remarkably similar pattern emerges for 'pluringulars'.[3] This paper presents a syntax for 'singular *they*/*them*' and 'pluringulars' that derives the verb agreement facts from a key distinction between downward Agree and Spec–Head agreement.

All the 'singular *they*/*them*' material for this paper was checked as part of a questionnaire study run on native English-speaking linguists, of various ages and genders and from various parts of the English-speaking world. The stimuli and results of the questionnaire are found in the Appendix. Owing at least in part to the fact that making reference to a single person with gender-neutral *they*/*them* is not (yet) part of every English speaker's active (L1) grammar, the picture is not uniform across the board. That not all English speakers have the same grammar is a familiar fact (thus, a reviewer points out that some varieties/registers of English require *is* with all post-verbal subjects of *there*-sentences); that using *they*/*them* with reference to a single (nonbinary) person is, for many speakers, essentially a second-language phenomenon is understandable in light of the fact that this use is a relatively recent socio-political development. What matters here is that a subset of the questionnaire respondents makes relative contrasts of the types presented in the paper, and, importantly, never in the direction *opposite* to the one indicated. So there exists a grammar

[2]This is true even in varieties of English that obey the Northern Subject Rule, whereby plural full-nominal subjects but not pronominal *they* give rise to finite verb forms suffixed with *-s*: *the men likes meat*/**they likes meat*.

[3]Most of the data given for 'singular *they*/*them*' below are adapted from Collins (2025). Most of the 'pluringular' data are adapted from den Dikken (2001). The adaptations, both for 'singular *they*/*them*' and 'pluringulars', involve minor lexical changes. I stress that 'pluringulars', while more common in British English, are found in a range of English dialects (Smith 2017).

of English 'singular *they*/*them*' that has the properties covered by the analysis proposed.

The contrasts reported in the sections that follow are seldom black-and-white (i.e., 1 *vs* 5, on the 5-point Likert scale used for the questionnaire study). The absolute status of the relatively better and relatively worse members of each pair is not what is at issue. The explanandum is the existence of contrasts between what is possible (at least marginally) and impossible.

2 Number agreement: 'Pluringulars' and 'singular *they*/*them*'

Number agreement between the subject and the finite verb is often sensitive to the placement of the subject relative to the verb — put in structural terms, to the difference between the Spec–Head and (downward) Agree relations maintained by the head T (see Sect. 4 for details). A familiar poster child for this is Modern Standard Arabic, where pre-verbal subjects control number agreement and post-verbal ones do not (see Benmamoun 2000 and references there).

English exhibits an effect of pre-/post-verbal placement on number agreement with 'pluringulars' (e.g., *family*) and 'singular *they*/*them*'.[4] We see this in four sets of data. Consider first specificational pseudoclefts with a *wh*-clause as one of the terms.[5] I preamble the critical examples in (5) and (6) with sentences containing a regular plural common-noun phrase (4).

(4) a. the members of my family {*is/are} what/who I rely on most
b. what/who I rely on most {is/are} the members of my family

(5) a. my family {is/are} what/who I rely on most
b. what/who I rely on most {is/*are} my family

(6) a. they {*is/are} what/who I rely on most ✓ single person
b. *i* what/who I rely on most is them ✓ single person
ii what/who I rely on most are them *single person

Closely related to the dataset in (4)–(6) are the examples in (7)–(9), which illustrate the agreement behaviour of a variant of the specificational pseudocleft with a relative clause headed by *all* instead of a *wh*-clause.

[4]For reasons entirely independent of agreement, the post-verbal pronoun in the constructions under investigation throughout this section must be realised as *them*. Post-verbal accusative *them* can, for some speakers, control number agreement with the finite verb (a point emphasised in Storment 2025 as well) – but only when making reference to multiple people. In Sect. 3, we will see similar behaviour for the second person pronoun, which (being syncretic for the nominative/accusative distinction) has the same case exponent in pre- and post-verbal position.

[5]There is speaker variation with respect to the choice of *what* or *who* as the introducer of the *wh*-clause of a pseudocleft with a [+human] focus — particularly when the *wh*-clause precedes the copula (where *who* is often found to be poor; see already Akmajian 1979:83, fn. 1, and also Higgins 1979:2). Reported in (4)–(6) are contrasts in minimal pairs with the same choice of *wh*-element in each member. About a third of the respondents report that *what/who I rely on most is them*$_{SG}$ is better than *what/who I rely on most is them*$_{PL}$; and *what/who I rely on most are them*$_{SG}$ is rejected virtually across the board, to a greater extent than *what/who I rely on most are them*$_{PL}$.

(7) a. the members of my family {*is/are} all I have left
b. all I have left {is/are} the members of my family

(8) a. my family {is/are} all I have left
b. all I have left {is/*are} my family

(9) a. they {*is/are} all I have left ✓single person
b. *i* all I have left is them ✓single person
ii all I have left are them *single person

Sentences with locative PP predicates that can undergo locative inversion also exhibit an asymmetry between pre- and post-verbal placement in the agreement behaviour of 'pluringulars' and 'singular *they*/*them*', as is shown in (11) and (12). The examples in (10), involving ordinary common-noun plurals, again serve as a baseline.

(10) a. the members of the finance committee {*is/are} on the third floor
b. on the third floor {*is/are} the members of the finance committee

(11) a. the finance committee {is/are} on the third floor
b. on the third floor {is/*are} the finance committee

(12) a. they {*is/are} on the third floor ✓single person
b. *i* on the third floor is them ✓single person
ii on the third floor are them *single person

Finally, from the b–examples in (10)–(12), it is but a small step (bearing in mind that 'expletive *there*' is formally a locative proform) to the examples in (13)–(15), featuring 'expletive *there*' in the structural subject position and a definite associate in post-copular position:[6]

(13) there {is/are} the members of the finance committee (to consider)

(14) there {is/*are} the finance committee (to consider)

(15) *i* there is them (to consider) ✓single person
ii there are them (to consider) *single person

3 Person agreement: *I*/*me* and *you*

In the examples presented in Sect. 2, placement of the subject in pre- or post-verbal position influences number agreement with the finite verb. Person agreement is also

[6]English 'expletive *there*' usually has an indefinite associate. But it is well known that it is possible to team *there* up with a definite nominal or pronoun under certain circumstances — incl. the so-called 'list reading' exploited in the examples in (13)–(15) (see Milsark 1974, 1977, Ward and Birner 1995; Hartmann 2008, and references cited there). Contraction of *is* onto *there* (*there's*) is generally preferred here. The examples in (15) were tested in the questionnaire without *to consider*; but since Collins (2025) features sentences with this infinitival clause included in them, I have added it in parentheses. (Collins adds a note at the end of his paper saying that one of his reviewers preferred singular *is* also with plural-referring *them*. Several questionnaire participants exhibit the same preference.).

sensitive to the position of the subject relative to the finite verb. The examples presented in the present section (constructed to parallel the ones given for 'singular *they*/*them*' in Sect. 2) illustrate this.

The dataset in (16)–(19) involves first person. Here, the use of the first person singular form *am* is ungrammatical when the pronominal subject appears in post-copular position.[7]

(16) a. I {*is/am} what/who you rely on most
b. what/who you rely on most {is/*am} me

(17) a. I {*is/am} all you have left
b. all you have left {is/*am} me

(18) a. I {*is/am} on the third floor
b. on the third floor {is/*am} me

(19) there {is/*am} me (to consider)

The examples in (20)–(23) feature the second person pronoun *you*, which in principle can be used with reference to either a single addressee or multiple referents.[8] In (20)–(23), just as in Sect. 2, *are* is impossible when the post-copular pronominal subject refers to a single person. When used in combination with pre-copular singular *you*, the form *are* appears to be an exponent of person agreement with the subject.[9]

(20) a. you {*is/are} what/who I rely on most ✓ single person
b. *i* what/who I rely on most is you ✓ single person
ii what/who I rely on most are you *single person

[7]The first person singular examples in (16)–(19) were not included in the questionnaire. For second person *you*, the locative inversion sentences in (22) were not included either. These data were verified with speakers separately.

[8]These examples were inspired by Heycock's (2012) pseudoclefts featuring *you* in (i). Heycock herself rejects *are* regardless of whether post-copular *you* refers to a single addressee or to multiple people (see also Storment 2025). My reviewers alerted me to the possibility that plural reference of post-copular *you* may make *are*/*were* better. In response to this, my questionnaire explicitly varied the number of the addressee. Based on this, I can confirm that for a small subset of the respondents, the form of the copula does indeed covary to some extent with the singular/plural distinction for post-copular *you*, such that *are* is relatively better when *you* refers to multiple people than when *you* has a single referent. The effect is marginal – a bit stronger in pseudoclefts than in *there* existentials. In pseudoclefts, about half of the respondents rate *are* very low irrespective of the referential number of post-copular *you*; in *there* sentences, the ratings for *are* are low almost across the board. Several speakers have pointed out that for post-copular *you* with plural reference, they prefer *you all*/*you guys*/*you two* to 'bare' *you*.

(i) a. what makes this party go {is/*are} you
b. all I could see {was/*were} you (Heycock 2012; judgements as in the original work)

[9]If one maintains that English *you* is always formally plural, even when it has a singular referent (cf. the French polite address form *vous*, which combines with *êtes* 'are.2PL'), *are* does not have to be specified for person: it can then be the exponent of the present-tense copula with a [PLUR] specification for number throughout (cf. Kayne 1989). On this hypothesis, the contrast found for some speakers in the acceptability of *are* between the versions of the b–examples in which *you* has a singular referent and those in which *you* has a plural referent may be assimilable to the contrast in the acceptability of *are* between 'singular *they*' and 'plural *they*' in postverbal position (Sect. 2).

(21) a. you {*is/are} all I have left ✓single person
b. *i* all I have left is you ✓single person
ii all I have left are you *single person

(22) a. you {*is/are} on the third floor ✓single person
b. *i* on the third floor is you ✓single person
ii on the third floor are you *single person

(23) *i* there is you (to consider) ✓single person
ii there are you (to consider) *single person

4 Person and the difference between Agree and Spec–Head agreement

Baker (2008, 2011) advances a Structural Condition on Person Agreement (SCOPA), mobilising the structural difference between (downward) Agree and Spec–Head agreement to capture the ban on person agreement with a post-verbal subject.[10] Den Dikken (2019) derives this condition from the hypothesis that person (marked as 'π') is represented as the specifier of the projection of number ('#'), which itself finds itself in the complement of D, as in (24). When this structure finds itself in the structural configuration in (25) (where 'XP' is a PP, 'expletive *there*', or the *wh*-clause or *all*-headed relative of a pseudocleft), T cannot access the πP inside DP, which is shielded from T by the DP phase, and whose features cannot 'percolate up' to D.[11] The result is the lack of person agreement with the post-verbal subject in (16)–(23).

[10]There are apparent counterexamples to Baker's SCOPA. In all likelihood, none holds up as a genuine counterargument. Italian (i) can be analysed as a case of agreement between T (*sono* 'am.1SG') and a silent *pro* in SpecTP (cf. Moro 1997). Dutch (ii) is grammatical with person agreement with *ik* 'I' only in root clauses: subordinate (iib) is impossible, suggesting that person agreement in (iia) is the product of Spec–Head agreement between *ik* and the copula followed by topicalisation of the predicate nominal to SpecCP *cum* T-to-C movement ('Verb Second'). Icelandic allows person agreement with post-copular subjects more broadly than Dutch (Hartmann and Heycock 2016, 2023), but is also known to have a wider distribution of 'embedded Verb Second' phenomena than Dutch. Finally, the subject can agree in person with a finite complementiser (see (iii), from a Limburg dialect of Dutch; see *i.a.* Haegeman 1992; Zwart 1993; Carstens 2003; van Koppen 2005). Here it is important to bear in mind that in spoken Dutch the complementiser can show up in subordinate *wh*-questions, to the right of the *wh*-constituent and the interrogative complementiser *of* 'if' (*ik vraag me af wie of dat dit gedaan heeft* 'I wonder who if that has done this'). This makes it plausible to think that *dat* 'that' originates lower than C – low enough, in some varieties, to establish a Spec–Head agreement relationship with the subject involving person.

(i) il colpevole sono io
the culprit am.1SG I

(ii) a. de schuldige ben ik
the culprit am I
b. *ze denken dat de schuldige ik ben
they think that the culprit I am

(iii) de-s doow Marie ontmoet-s
that-2SG you$_{SG}$ Marie meet-2SG

[11]πP cannot propagate its person feature to the main projection spine by establishing a Spec–Head relation with #: # is 'pure' number; it does not agree with its specifier for person or any other feature that # does

(24) $[_{DP}\ D\ [_{\#P}\ [_{Spec}\ \pi P]\ [_{\#'}\ \#\ [_{NP}\ ...\ N\ ...]]]]$

(25) $[_{TP}\ XP\ [_{T'}\ T\ ...\ [_{DP}\ D\ [_{\#P}\ [_{Spec}\ \pi P]\ [_{\#'}\ \#\ [_{NP}\ ...\ N\ ...]]]]]]$

Now imagine that the EPP property of T is not satisfied by XP but by DP itself, as in (26).

(26) $[_{TP}\ [_{DP}\ D\ [_{\#P}\ [_{Spec}\ \pi P]\ [_{\#'}\ \#\ [_{NP}\ ...\ N\ ...]]]]\ [_{T'}\ T\ ...\ \sout{DP}\ ...\ ]]$

Here T establishes a probe–goal relation with DP. As a result of this, DP becomes transparent (see Rackowski and Richards 2005 on the disopacating effect of a probe–goal relationship between an outside head and a phase): all the relevant features inside DP, including the person feature harboured by πP, become accessible to T for agreement. Den Dikken (2019:7) postulates a TOTAL MATCH requirement for Spec–Head agreement (see Guasti and Rizzi 2002; Franck et al. 2006; Shlonsky 2004:1496, and den Dikken and Dékány 2018 for relevant facts and discussion): 'feature checking under the Spec–Head relationship requires total matching of the features of the head and the features of its specifier'. So person agreement not only becomes possible in (26), it is obligatory, as seen in the a–examples in (16)–(18) and (20)–(22), featuring pre-verbal subjects.

5 Number agreement with *you*, 'pluringulars' and 'singular *they*/*them*'

Returning now to number, what we need is an analysis in which (*a*) the pronoun *you* can agree for number but not for person when in post-copular position, and (*b*) 'pluringulars' and 'singular *they*/*them*' can control plural verb agreement in a Spec–Head configuration but not in a downward Agree configuration. Let me start with (*a*).

For *you*, its agreement behaviour follows if this pronoun has the syntax presented in (27).

(27) a. $[_{DP}\ D_{[PLUR]}\ [_{\#P}\ [_{Spec}\ \pi P{=}you]\ [_{\#'}\ \#_{[PLUR]}\ [_{NP}\ pro_{[PLUR];\ [\![plurality]\!]}]]]]$
→ 'plural *you*'

b. $[_{DP}\ D\ [_{\#P}\ [_{Spec}\ \pi P{=}you]\ [_{\#'}\ \#\ [_{NP}\ pro]]]]$
→ 'singular *you*'

The surface form *you* is the exponent of πP, not NP, as is clear from the fact that *you* can combine with NPs headed by plural common nouns, as in *you people*, *you guys* and *you linguists* (see Postal 1966). In 'bare' *you*, the NP portion of the structure is silent: *pro*. This *pro* can be semantically singular or plural (the latter specified in (27a) and hereinafter as '[[plurality]]'); in languages that mark number morphologically (such as English), when semantically plural, *pro* is also morphologically plural (represented as '[PLUR]'). Only morphological features can control agreement. The feature [PLUR] of *pro* in (27a) is in an Agree relation with #, with which D Agrees

not itself possess. D cannot agree with πP either: it, too, lacks a person feature. The unique locus of person in the DP is πP.

in turn. As a result, [PLUR] in (27a) is marked on D and accessible outside DP. The person feature of *you*, on the other hand, is not accessible under downward Agree; it can be accessed by T only when the DP of *you* is raised into SpecTP.

The specifier of #P can in principle be filled by any nominal constituent that can be construed as being in a predicational or specificational relationship with the complement of #, with # serving as the RELATOR in the sense of den Dikken (2006). For 'pluringulars', this opens up the analysis in (28) (cf. den Dikken 2001), with a silent plural pronominal in the specifier and the singular (i.e., unmarked) *committee* noun in the complement of the #-head:

(28) $[_{DP}\ D\ [_{\#P}\ [_{Spec}\ pro_{[PLUR];\ [\![plurality]\!]}]\ [_{\#'}\ \#\ [_{NP}\ \ldots\ N{=}committee\ \ldots]]]]$

The silent pronoun (which itself has an internal structure including #, not shown here) in the left-branch position inside the complex DP is both morphologically and semantically plural. The #-head on the main projection spine is not specified as [PLUR]: its complement, *committee*, is formally singular; though its specifier is marked [PLUR], # cannot agree with it because # cannot probe it.[12] Because the single occurrence of the morphological feature [PLUR] in (28) is on a left branch inside the complex noun phrase representing the 'pluringular', plural agreement with the finite verb is possible only in the Spec–Head configuration, not under downward Agree.

For the pronoun *they*, I postulate a combination of the analyses proposed for plural *you* and 'pluringulars'. The physical pronoun *they* (itself a syntactic complex containing a $\#_{[PLUR]}$ head: *they* is morphologically plural in all of its uses) occupies the specifier position of #P; the complement of the #-head is a silent pronoun. The difference between 'singular *they*' and 'plural *they*' is a function of the feature specification of the main-spine head # and *pro*: when these are specified as [PLUR], we get 'plural *they*' (29a); unmarked # and *pro* deliver 'singular *they*' (29b). The semantic plurality or singularity of *they* is harboured by *pro*, not by the physical pronoun.

(29) a. $[_{DP}\ D_{[PLUR]}\ [_{\#P}\ [_{Spec}\ they_{[PLUR]}]\ [_{\#'}\ \#_{[PLUR]}\ [_{NP}\ pro_{[PLUR];\ [\![plurality]\!]}]]]]$
→ 'plural *they*'

b. $[_{DP}\ D\ [_{\#P}\ [_{Spec}\ they_{[PLUR]}]\ [_{\#'}\ \#\ [_{NP}\ pro]]]]$
→ 'singular *they*'

The analyses in (28) and (29b) explain why plural verb agreement with 'pluringulars' and 'singular *they*/*them*' is impossible when they find themselves 'downstream' from T. The discussion of (25) has shown that T cannot downward-Agree with features of the occupant of Spec#P inside DP. Plural agreement with a post-verbal 'pluringular' or 'singular *they*/*them*' is thus ruled out – which is exactly what we saw in (5b), (6b), (8b), (9b), (11b), (12b), (14), and (15).

[12] A head can only agree with something that it probes; probing is strictly downwards. See already Chomsky (1995:Ch. 4) for the observation that a constituent base-generated in the specifier position of a head must not be allowed to check features against that head: the 'little v*' of transitive clauses can engage in a feature-checking relation for case and φ-features with a noun phrase born in the VP (which can become a *derived* specifier of v* via object shift) but not with the external argument (which is externally merged in Spec$v$*P).

As soon as T probes the entire DP and attracts it to SpecTP for EPP-satisfaction purposes, however, the morphological [PLUR] feature of the specifier of #P in (28) and (29b) becomes accessible to T. By the TOTAL MATCH constraint on Spec–Head agreement, number agreement is then expected to be obligatory. For the 'singular *they*' examples, this is all that needs to be said. And to understand the grammaticality of singular inflection in (5a), (8a) and (11a), we should bear in mind that it is of course by no means an obligation for *committee*-nouns to be part of a complex DP of the type in (28): they can also project a simple singular common-noun phrase lacking a silent plural pronoun in Spec#P.

The explanandum for both 'singular *they*' and 'pluringulars' is the distribution of singular and plural verb agreement with them and, more particularly, the fact that, in both cases, plural agreement occurs only when they are in a Spec–Head relationship with T. The explanation, in both cases, revolves around a syntactically complex representation including a silent pronoun. For *committee*-type nominals, the question of how a morphologically singular noun can, under certain circumstances, control plural agreement was answered in den Dikken (2001) and in the above with an appeal to the hypothesis that their syntax contains a silent plural *pro*. The syntax of *they* similarly involves a silent pronoun alongside the spelled-out one – a plural *pro* in the case of garden-variety plural *they* but a *pro* unmarked for number (morphologically as well as semantically) in the case of 'singular *they*'. What the *pro* of 'pluringulars' (see (28)) and the *pro* of plural *they* (see (29a)) share is the fact that both are morphologically and semantically plural and both can control plural agreement (albeit only in the Spec–Head configuration in the case of 'pluringulars'). What 'pluringulars' and the 'singular *they*' in (29b) have in common is the discrepancy in number specification between the two terms related by #. This gives them their 'dual nature' (which may also be responsible for their restricted distribution among speakers). Because their morphological feature [PLUR] is represented only on the term located in Spec#P, it is only in the Spec–Head configuration that 'pluringulars' and 'singular *they*' give rise to plural agreement inflection on the finite verb.[13]

6 Further benefits of the analysis of 'singular *they*/*them*'

The syntax in (29) represents *they* in terms of a relation between two phrasal terms, one of them silent (*pro*). But as we already saw below (27), the complement of # in the syntax of *you* can be spelled out as a common noun phrase. Such pronoun–noun

[13]The first person plural pronoun *we* can be used with reference to a single speaker in the highly specialised case of 'royal *we*'. The use of *we* with reference to the addressee (often called 'nurse's *we*', illustrated by *how are we feeling today?*) involves a further discrepancy between the overt pronoun and the pronoun that is interpreted: both number and person are unmatched. While it is entirely possible to represent these uses of *we* with the aid of structures parallel to (29b), confirming such an analysis would require a close examination of the agreement behaviour of 'royal *we*' and 'nurse's *we*' as the post-verbal subject of pseudoclefts, locative inversion constructions and *there*-sentences. I have not been able to undertake this: it is very difficult to gauge judgements on these uses of *we*.

constructions are also possible with *us* and, in some varieties of (American) English (though not in Postal's 1966), with 'plural *them*':

(30)

a.	many people can't stand us linguists		*many people can't stand me linguist
b.	many people can't stand you linguists		*many people can't stand you linguist
c.	%many people can't stand them linguists		*many people can't stand them linguist

But 'singular *them*' cannot combine with a singular common noun (see Pesti 2024), not even for speakers who accept the left-hand example in (30c): its right-hand version is no better than the other singular cases above it. The fact that the *pro* in (29b) cannot be replaced with a singular common noun serving as a predicate for the pronoun ties in with the fact that it is impossible in English to use bare singular common nouns as predicates (**I am linguist*, **she is linguist*).[14]

When English pronouns are bound by a local antecedent, they generally require the attachment of *self* or *selves*, with the choice between these elements determined by the number of the pronominal host: *myself* ~ *ourselves*. For *them*, the picture here is subtler. While explicitly plural antecedents require *themselves*, singular antecedents can combine with *themselves* – though *themselves* remains possible there.[15] The analysis of 'singular *they*/*them*' can account for the availability of both *themselves* and *themself* with singular antecedents in the following way. Assume that *self* projects in syntax, separately from its pronominal host (see Ahn and Kalin 2018), and that *self* matches the morphological number specification of its local host as a function of concord. In the syntax in (29), the projection of *self* can combine either with the overt pronoun in Spec#P (i.e., *them*) or with *pro*. This gives us the structures in (31) and (32) as logical possibilities.[16] In (31), the local host for *self* is *them*, which is always morphologically plural. Hence, (31a) and (31b) both deliver *selves*. In (32),

[14]Dutch allows bare singular predicate nominals (*ik ben*/*jij bent*/*zij is*/*hen is taalkundige* 'I am/you$_{SG}$ are/she is/they$_{SG}$ is linguist') but still rules out singular pronoun–noun constructions (**ik*/*jij*/*hen taalkundige* 'I/you$_{SG}$/they$_{SG}$ linguist' ~ *wij*/*jullie taalkundigen* 'we/you$_{PL}$ linguists'). Representations parallel to (27b) and (29b) are available in principle for *I*/*ik* and *she*/*zij*. But the *pro* in these configurations cannot be replaced with a bare common noun. Only in expressions in which *both* terms of the predication relation are bare (e.g., *that* [*idiot doctor*]) can a common noun phrase inside a two-term DP completely lack its own functional superstructure. Why this is remains an open question.

[15]Conrod et al. (2022) conducted a large-scale (>1,000 participants) rating study of *themself* and *themselves* taking singular antecedents. Their study finds that with both quantified and referential singular antecedents, *themself* is rated higher than *themselves*, and that this effect is strongest with proper names and proximal definites. However, while sometimes dispreferred, *themselves* is never excluded when its antecedent is singular.

[16](31) forges a link between reflexive-*self* and inalienably possessed nominals (cf. *yourself*/*selves* and *your head*/*heads*). (32) likens reflexive-*self* to intensifier-*self* (the latter having an overt pronominal base in English). A third logical possibility would be a syntax in which *self* serves as a replacement of *pro* in (29). But the version of plural (29a) with *selves* 'fleshing out' the complement of # would, like %*them linguists*, be available only to a subset of speakers (recall (30c)), and would at any rate yield an output no different from that of (31a) and (32a). And (29b) with *self* in place of *pro* arguably would have no grammatical output at all: *themself* is impossible here for the same reason **them linguist* is; and *themselve*s is impossible because %*them linguist*s supports no 'singular *them*' reading.

the local host for *self* is *pro* – which is plural in (32a), yielding *selves*, but singular in (32b), resulting in *self*.

(31) a. $[_{DP}\ D_{[PLUR]}\ [_{\#P}\ [_{Spec}\ them_{[PLUR]}\ selves_{[PLUR]}]\ [_{\#'}\ \#_{[PLUR]}\ [_{NP}\ pro_{[PLUR];\ [\![plurality]\!]}]]]]$

b. $[_{DP}\ D\ \ [_{\#P}\ [_{Spec}\ them_{[PLUR]}\ selves_{[PLUR]}]\ [_{\#'}\ \#\ [_{NP}\ pro]]]]$

(32) a. $[_{DP}\ D_{[PLUR]}\ [_{\#P}\ [_{Spec}\ them_{[PLUR]}]\ [_{\#'}\ \#_{[PLUR]}\ [_{NP}\ pro_{[PLUR];\ [\![plurality]\!]}\ selves_{[PLUR]}]]]]$

b. $[_{DP}\ D\ \ [_{\#P}\ [_{Spec}\ them_{[PLUR]}]\ [_{\#'}\ \#\ \ [_{NP}\ pro\ self]]]]$

The syntax in (31b) allows us to understand the acceptability of *themselves* with a singular antecedent, as a case of concord for the morphological feature [PLUR] within the complex DP containing *them* and the *self*-element. As an alternative to (31b), there is (32b), featuring a non-plural *pro* as the host for *self* — a formal recasting of what some might call 'semantic agreement'.

The syntax in (29b) also gives us an understanding of the trouble with restrictive modification of 'singular *they*' illustrated in (33b).[17]

(33) a. she/he (?in that rainbow-coloured hat and suit) is Chris
b. they (*in that rainbow-coloured hat and suit) are Chris
c. they (?in those rainbow-coloured hats and suits) are Mary and John

(34) a. Chris is her/him (?in that rainbow-coloured hat and suit)
b. Chris is them (?in that rainbow-coloured hat and suit)
c. Mary and John are them (?in those rainbow-coloured hats and suits)

Given the structure of 'singular *they*' in (29b), there is nothing for the PP to modify in (33b). PP-modification of a silent element is impossible.[18] The physical pronoun *they* cannot serve as the host for the modifier either, because *they* is externally merged on a left branch inside the structure of the complex noun phrase, thereby prevented from hosting modifiers that linearly follow it by way of the Head-Final Filter.[19] At-

[17] To my knowledge, this observation is original to this paper. Postmodification of pronouns is always very difficult in English – thus, the examples in (33)–(34) with the PP included in them are all quite marginal at best. What matters for our purposes is (*a*) that there are speakers who differentiate between (33b) and (33c), finding the former relatively worse than the latter, and (*b*) that (33b) is worse than its inverted version in (34b), featuring *them*.

Note that singular appositions are fine with 'singular *they*': *they, the bank manager, are called Chris*. This is thanks to the fact that appositions do not serve as direct syntactic modifiers of (a subpart of) the associate noun phrase: they form a proposition of their own and have their own (usually silent) subject (see Heringa 2012).

[18] I restrict the scope of this statement to PP-modification. Regardless of whether *the good, the bad and the ugly* involves modification of *pro* or a silent common noun (PEOPLE), the output is grammatical; by contrast, **the in the hat and the in the suit* is impossible, from which I conclude that PPs cannot modify a silent element.

[19] The Head-Final Filter (due to Williams 1982) is responsible for such improprieties as **the proud of his children father*. If the Head-Final Filter is a surface (PF) condition, it may not be in force (29b): the *pro* to the right of the PP has no PF exponent. The roots of the Head-Final Filter remain nebulous. But if it is a narrow-syntactic condition, it not only accounts for (33b) but may also capture the apparent discomfort of 'singular *they*' with ostension in identificational sentences (as in ??*they over there are Chris*).

taching the PP to a projection of #, while possible in (29a) because # has featural content (hence the relative well-formedness of (33a,c)), is illicit in (29b) because featureless # is not a candidate for modification. And for much the same reason, attachment of the PP to a projection of D is impossible as well: in the syntax of (29b), D is silent and featureless. It is in D's features that the difference lies between (33b) and (34b): in the syntax of *them*, D has an accusative case feature, providing D with the necessary featural wherewithal for its projection to serve as host to a modifier.[20]

A final advantage of the syntax in (29) is that it accounts for an interesting observation made by Moulton et al. (2020): 'singular *they*' gives rise to more favourable judgements in the presence of an unequivocally singular linguistic antecedent (as in (35a)) than when 'singular *they*' itself is the antecedent (see (35b)). (Italicisation here marks intended coreference.)

(35) a. *the reporter* said that *their* cellphone was recording the interview
b. *they* said that *their* cellphone was recording the interview

In the case of (35a), the dependency established between *their* and explicitly singular *the reporter* requires for the representation of *their* the selection of (29b), featuring a *pro* that is unspecified for the morphological feature [PLUR]. But in (35b), nothing about the morphosyntax tells us that *their* is singular: the antecedent, *they*, does not wear its singularity on its sleeve (the finite verb *said* is evidently compatible with a syntax for *they* as in (29a)). For both *they* and *their*, the unmarked morphosyntax of (35b) thus employs the syntax in (29a), where the pronoun and *pro* are concordial. Overruling (29a) as the structure for *they* and *their* in (35b) and selecting (29b) instead is certainly possible in the discourse context, so (35b) is interpretable with singular reference for these pronouns. But while the selection of (29b) for *their* is morphosyntactically required in the case of (35a), the morphosyntax of (35b) is fully compatible with (29a), which makes a singular representation of *their* more surprising there than in (35a).

7 Concluding remarks

This short paper has shown that by establishing connections between the agreement behaviour of person and that of number in 'pluringulars' and 'singular *they*/*them*', we procure a syntactic representation for the latter which explains not only the sensitivity of number agreement to placement relative to T but also four other properties of this complex pronoun.

I close by briefly addressing the fact that 'singular *they*/*them*' externally distributes as a pronoun while 'pluringulars', pronoun–noun constructions, epithets and imposters do not (recall (1–2)). What is it that makes a DP a 'pronoun'? Inclusion of

[20]The pronoun *you* can be modified by a PP in both pre- and post-verbal position, with both singular and plural referents. Particularly relevant to the text discussion is that *you in that rainbow-coloured suit and hat are* {*an interesting person*/*Chris*} is grammatical. What seems to be playing a role here is that, unlike *they*, the pronoun *you* is syncretic for the nominative/accusative case distinction, and that default case in English is accusative. This may be sufficient to give the D-head of 'nominative *you*' the content to allow its projection to host a PP-modifier.

a vocabulary item, such as *they* or *you*, is not sufficient for a DP to externally distribute pronominally: *you linguists* cannot occur in tags. Inclusion of *pro* inside DP is not the key either: 'pluringulars' contain *pro* (see (28)) but do not distribute as pronouns. The emergent generalisation is that only those DPs that feature a pronoun *on their main spine* (i.e., in the complement of #) distribute as pronouns in their external syntax.

Appendix: Questionnaire and responses

In this appendix, I reproduce the stimuli used in the questionnaire study run for this paper (incl. the contexts in which the stimuli were presented to the participants), as well as the responses received. The responses are presented in the form of a table (see Table 1) listing the individual participants' scores, given on a 1–5 Likert scale, with '5' as the highest score. The participants (all native-speaker linguists, of various ages and genders and from various parts of the English-speaking world) are listed on the horizontal axis, identified only by letters in alphabetic sequence (not assigned based on the participants' names). In the results table, the items of particular interest are highlighted in greyscale. Because of the high degree of variation between individual responses, no statistical analysis was run; what is informative are the within-subjects contrasts in raw scores.

A.1 Questionnaire stimuli and contexts

(Q1) You are at the office. Your colleague Bill stops by, looking for Mary and John, the chair and the deputy chair of the department. You say:

a. Mary and John is in the cafeteria.
b. Mary and John are in the cafeteria.
c. They is in the cafeteria.
d. They are in the cafeteria.

(Q2) You are at the office. Your colleague Bill stops by, looking for Chris, the nonbinary dean of the faculty of humanities. You say:

a. Chris is in the cafeteria.
b. Chris are in the cafeteria.
c. They is in the cafeteria.
d. They are in the cafeteria.

(Q3) Your newly appointed colleague Bill is trying to figure out who has offices on what floor, mumbling: "So you are on the second floor, and on the third floor, with a view of the lake, is Frank?" You tell him: "No, I am on the first floor; Frank is on the second." And then you point at a picture in the college newspaper of Mary and John, the chair and the deputy chair of the department, and you add:

a. On the third floor is them.
b. On the third floor are them.

(Q4) Your newly appointed colleague Bill is trying to figure out who has offices on what floor, mumbling: "So you are on the second floor, and on the third floor, with a view of the lake, is Frank?" You tell him: "No, I am on the first floor; Frank is on the second." And then you point at a picture in the college newspaper of Chris, the nonbinary dean of the faculty, and you add:

a. On the third floor is them.
b. On the third floor are them.

(Q5) Mary and John, the chair and the deputy chair of the department, usually give a little speech at the annual holiday party. But this year they can't make it and they tell you they're worried that no one might be able to do it instead. You point out that Sue and Bob, two senior colleagues, have always enjoyed giving speeches, and you say:

a. There is them!
b. There are them!

(Q6) Mary and John, the chair and the deputy chair of the department, usually give a little speech at the annual holiday party. But this year they can't make and they tell you they're worried that no one might be able to do it instead. You point out that Chris, the nonbinary dean of the faculty, will attend the party this year, and you say:

a. There is them!
b. There are them!

(Q7) Mary and John, the chair and the deputy chair of the department, have just asked you for suggestions on who could present the Employee of the Year award this year. You point out that it's been a while since they last presented the award in person, and say:

a. There is you!
b. There are you!

(Q8) Fritz, the newly appointed college chancellor, has just asked you for suggestions on who could present the Employee of the Year award this year. You think it would be good if Fritz marked the occasion to do this in person, and say:

a. There is you!
b. There are you!

(Q9) You are at the faculty's annual fancy-dress party. Your colleague Bill asks you whether Mary and John, your chair and deputy chair, are present at the party. You confirm that they are, and point to two people standing side by side, saying:

a. They in the rainbow-coloured hats and suits are Mary and John.
b. Mary and John are them in the rainbow-coloured hats and suits.

(Q10) You are at the faculty's annual fancy-dress party. Your colleague Bill asks you whether Chris, the nonbinary dean of the faculty, is present at the party. You confirm that they are, and point to a person in the middle of the crowd, saying:

a. They in the rainbow-coloured hat and suit are Chris.
b. Chris is them in the rainbow-coloured hat and suit.

(Q11) You are talking to your colleague Bill about your siblings, who have always played an essential role in your life. You say:

a. They is what I rely on most.
b. They are what I rely on most.
c. They is who I rely on most.
d. They are who I rely on most.

(Q12) You are talking to your colleague Bill about your nonbinary sibling, who has always played an essential role in your life. You say:

a. They is what I rely on most.
b. They are what I rely on most.
c. They is who I rely on most.
d. They are who I rely on most.

(Q13) You are talking to your colleague Bill about your siblings, who have always played an essential role in your life. You say:

a. What I rely on most is them.
b. What I rely on most are them.
c. Who I rely on most is them.
d. Who I rely on most are them.

(Q14) You are talking to your colleague Bill about your nonbinary sibling, who has always played an essential role in your life. You say:

a. What I rely on most is them.
b. What I rely on most are them.
c. Who I rely on most is them.
d. Who I rely on most are them.

(Q15) You are talking to your siblings, who have always played an essential role in your life, and you say:

a. What I rely on most is you.
b. What I rely on most are you.
c. Who I rely on most is you.
d. Who I rely on most are you.

(Q16) You are talking to your sibling, who has always played an essential role in your life, and you say:

a. What I rely on most is you.
b. What I rely on most are you.
c. Who I rely on most is you.
d. Who I rely on most are you.

(Q17) You are talking to your colleague Bill about the fact that a lot of close friends and relatives of yours have passed away recently, and say about your siblings:

a. They is all I have left.
b. They are all I have left.
c. All I have left is them.
d. All I have left are them.

(Q18) You are talking to your colleague Bill about the fact that a lot of close friends and relatives of yours have passed away recently, and say about your nonbinary sibling:

a. They is all I have left.
b. They are all I have left.
c. All I have left is them.
d. All I have left are them.

(Q19) You are talking to your siblings about the fact that a lot of close friends and relatives have passed away recently, and you say:

a. You is all I have left.
b. You are all I have left.
c. All I have left is you.
d. All I have left are you.

(Q20) You are talking to your last remaining sibling about the fact that a lot of close friends and relatives have passed away recently, and you say:

a. You is all I have left.
b. You are all I have left.
c. All I have left is you.
d. All I have left are you.

A.2 Results table

Table 1 Questionnaire results

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
(Q1a) Mary and John is in the cafeteria	1	2	3	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
(Q1b) Mary and John are in the cafeteria	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
(Q1c) they$_{PL}$ is in the cafeteria	1	2	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
(Q1d) they$_{PL}$ are in the cafeteria	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
(Q2a) Chris is in the cafeteria	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
(Q2b) Chris are in the cafeteria	1	2	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
(Q2c) they$_{SG}$ is in the cafeteria	1	2	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
(Q2d) they$_{SG}$ are in the cafeteria	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	3	5	4	4	5	5	5
(Q3a) on the third floor is them$_{PL}$	4	2	4	2	4	1	4	2	4	3	4	4	1	2	3
(Q3b) on the third floor are them$_{PL}$	3	2	5	2	4	1	2	1	1	1.5	2	2	1	1	1
(Q4a) on the third floor is them$_{SG}$	4	4	4	4	4	1	4	2	4	3	4	3	1	2	3
(Q4b) on the third floor are them$_{SG}$	2	2	4	1	1/2	1	2	1	1	1.5	2	2	1	1	1
(Q5a) there is them$_{PL}$!	4	4	4	2	4	1	4/5	4	4	5	4	4	3	4	2
(Q5b) there are them$_{PL}$!	4	2	5	2	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
(Q6a) there is them$_{SG}$!	4	4	4	3	4	1	4/5	4	4	5	4	3	3	4	2
(Q6b) there are them$_{SG}$!	2	1	4	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
(Q7a) there is you$_{PL}$!	4	4	4	5	4	2	4	5	5	5	4	4	3	4	2
(Q7b) there are you$_{PL}$!	3	2	4	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1
(Q8a) there is you$_{SG}$!	5	5	5	5	4	2	5	4	5	5	4	4	3	4	2
(Q8b) there are you$_{SG}$!	2	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1
(Q9a) they+PP are Mary and John	2	4	3	5	2	1	2	2/3	4	2	1	1	2	1	1
(Q9b) Mary and John are them+PP	2	3	5	5	3	1	1	1	2	1	2	5	1	2	1
(Q10a) they+PP are Chris	1	2	3	2	1	1	2	2/3	1	2	1	1	1	1	1
(Q10b) Chris is them+PP	2	3	5	5	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1
(Q11a) they$_{PL}$ is what I rely on most	1	2	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
(Q11b) they$_{PL}$ are what I rely on most	3	5	3	5	4/5	1	5	2	5	4	3	5	1	3	5
(Q11c) they$_{PL}$ is who I rely on most	1	2	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
(Q11a) they$_{PL}$ are who I rely on most	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	2	5	5
(Q12a) they$_{SG}$ is what I rely on most	1	–[1]	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
(Q12b) they$_{SG}$ are what I rely on most	3	–[1]	3	5	4/5	1	5	1	3	3	2	5	1	3	5
(Q12c) they$_{SG}$ is who I rely on most	1	–[1]	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
(Q12d) they$_{SG}$ are who I rely on most	5	–[1]	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	5	5	5	2	5	5
(Q13a) what I rely on most is them$_{PL}$	4	4	4	5	4	1	4	2	5	5	5	5	4	4	4
(Q13b) what I rely on most are them$_{PL}$	3	3?	4	1	3	1	3/4	2	1	3	2	3	1	1	1
(Q13c) who I rely on most is them$_{PL}$	4	2	5	5	3	3	1/2	1	4	5	1	4	1	4	2
(Q13d) who I rely on most are them$_{PL}$	3	3	5	1	4/5	3	1/2	4	2	3	1	2	1	1	1
(Q14a) what I rely on most is them$_{SG}$	5	4	4	5	4	1	4	2	5	5	5	5	4	4	4
(Q14b) what I rely on most are them$_{SG}$	2	3?	4	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	3	1	1	1
(Q14c) who I rely on most is them$_{SG}$	5	4	5	5	4	3	1/2	4	3	5	1	4	1	4	2

Table 1 (*Continued*)

(Q14d) who I rely on most are them$_{SG}$	2	2	5	1	1	1	1/2	3	1	2	1	2	1	1	1
(Q15a) what I rely on most is you$_{PL}$	4	4	4	5	4	1	4	2	5	5	5	5	4	4	4
(Q15b) what I rely on most are you$_{PL}$	3	3	3	1	4	1	2	1	1	1	1	4	1	1	1
(Q15c) who I rely on most is you$_{PL}$	5	3	4	5	4	3	1/2	4	5	5	1	3	1	5	2
(Q15d) who I rely on most are you$_{PL}$	3	5	4	1	4	3	1/2	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	1
(Q16a) what I rely on most is you$_{SG}$	5	5	4	5	4	1	4	2	5	5	5	5	4	4	4
(Q16b) what I rely on most are you$_{SG}$	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	1	1	1
(Q16c) who I rely on most is you$_{SG}$	5	5	5	5	4	3	1/2	4	5	5	1	3	1	5	2
(Q16d) who I rely on most are you$_{SG}$	2	1	2	1	1	1	1/2	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1
(Q17a) they$_{PL}$ is all I have left	1	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
(Q17b) they$_{PL}$ are all I have left	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
(Q17c) all I have left is them$_{PL}$	5	1	5	5	5	2	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
(Q17d) all I have left are them$_{PL}$	4	5	5	1	4	3	4/5	4	2	4	2	4	1	1	1
(Q18a) they$_{SG}$ is all I have left	1	–[1]	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
(Q18b) they$_{SG}$ are all I have left	5	–[1]	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5
(Q18c) all I have left is them$_{SG}$	4	3	5	5	5	3	4/5	4	4	5	5	4	5	5	5
(Q18d) all I have left are them$_{SG}$	2	2	5	1	1	1	2	3	1	1.5	1	4	1	1	1
(Q19a) you$_{PL}$ is all I have left	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
(Q19b) you$_{PL}$ are all I have left	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
(Q19c) all I have left is you$_{PL}$	4	3	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
(Q19d) all I have left are you$_{PL}$	4	5	5	1	1	3	2/3	3	1	2	1	3	1	1	1
(Q20a) you$_{SG}$ is all I have left	1	5	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
(Q20b) you$_{SG}$ are all I have left	5	3?	5	5	5	5	5	1	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
(Q20c) all I have left is you$_{SG}$	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
(Q20d) all I have left are you$_{SG}$	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	3	1	1	1

Note [1] Not rated. Respondent's comment: 'I don't have a grammar for this. (When I say "I don't have a grammar" I mean that this choice is no worse or better than the alternatives.)'

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