

# Antecedent NP Heaviness and the Choice of Pronouns in English: A Cognitive View

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## 1. Introductory Remarks

The objective of this paper is to reconsider Channon's (1980) argument that the increasing size and complexity of an antecedent noun phrase (NP) is correlated with the increasing likelihood of pronominalization by *that* and the decreasing acceptability of other pronouns, to cast light on some facts that have been overlooked, and to present an alternative account based on cognitive notions which can account for these problems with Channon's observations.

In his discussion of the use of anaphoric *that*, Channon, offering (1) as an example, says that "the heavier the antecedent NP or the complicated its surrounding context, the more likely it is to be replaced by *that*" (p.104).

- (1) a. Don likes skiing. Steve likes it (?that, \*them), too.  
b. Don likes skiing and skating. Steve likes that (??it, ??them), too.  
c. Don likes skiing, skating, tobogganing and participating in winter sports in general. Steve likes that (\*it, \*them), too.

To the best of my knowledge, no research has been done in this subject except Channon.<sup>1</sup>

The present paper first points out that Channon's claim does not necessarily reflect the way native English speakers actually use pronouns, depending on native English speakers' reactions or intuitions.<sup>2</sup> It then considers the reasons why these disagreements between Channon's observations and my informants' judgments are caused. Finally, it claims that the selection of *it/that/them*, in actual usage, relies upon much less strict criteria than Channon asserts.

## 2. Channon (1980)

This section observes the disagreements between Channon's analysis of the antecedent NP and the pronouns and the native speakers' responses concerning examples given by Channon.<sup>3</sup> To begin with, Channon's viewpoint is shown in the following:

- (2) ... anaphoric *that* functions in cases where the antecedent NP may be complex enough so that it is difficult to process it and assign the necessary features rapidly or conveniently, or where there is a large amount of unrelated intervening material which overtaxes the ability of short-term memory to keep track of or recover the necessary feature specifications. In general, the heavier the antecedent NP or the more complicated its surrounding context, the more likely it is to be replaced by *that* (p.104).

Now let us consider the following examples by Channon respectively. According to him, in term of the point of view in (2), *that* is the only one appropriate choice in (3 a, b, c):

- (3) a. Larry had a hamburger and a coke, and I had that (\*it, \*them, \*one, \*some), too.
- b. Larry had a hamburger and coffee, and I had that (\*it, \*them, \*one, \*some), too.
- c. Larry had fried chicken, mashed potatoes and broccoli, and I had that(\*it, \*them, \*one, \*some), too.

(Channon 1980: 102)

As for (3 a, c), however, *them*, not *that*, was chosen by most informants. In (3 b) *one* or *it* was preferred to *them*. The reason would be that *a hamburger and coffee* could be interpreted as a single dish.

Examples (4) and (5) are cases where the pronouns refer to not things but action(s). Channon asserts (4 b, c) and (5 b, c) are cases where *that* is the most natural choice:

- (4) a. Don likes skiing. Steve likes it (?that, \*them), too.
  - b. Don likes skiing and skating. Steve likes that (??it, ??them), too.
  - c. Don likes skiing, skating, tobogganing and participating in winter sports in general. Steve likes that (\*it, \*them), too. (= (1))
- (5) a. I like to sit by the fire, and Steve likes it/?that (\*them), too.
  - b. I like to sit by the fire, drink beer and relax, and Steve likes it/that (\*them), too.
  - c. I like to sit by the fire, drink beer and relax on a cloud crisp afternoon after a good day of skiing up in the Rockies, and Steve likes that/?it (\*them), too.

(Channon 1980: 105)

Most informant reactions, however, were different from Channon's account in that they chose *them* in (4 b) and (5 b). Interestingly enough, several people found *it* to be preferable in all sentences in (4) and (5).

Examples (6) and (7) below are concerned with the acceptability of *that* with or without a long subordinating clause. The difference between (6) and (7) is whether a *because*-clause is included or not:

- (6) A: I hope we get a man who is honest enough to bring honor and dignity back to politics in the White House this time.
  - B: I hope we get one/?that (\*him, \*it, \*them, \*some), too.
- (7) A: I hope we get a man who is honest enough to bring honor and dignity back to politics in the White House this time, because we really need someone who can restore faith in government and put the country back on the right track.
  - B: I hope we get that/??one (\*him, \*it, \*them, \*some), too.

(Channon 1980: 105)

Although Channon states that in (7 B) *that* seems to be the most natural choice and *one* is beginning to be a questionable choice, none of the native speakers I consulted chose *that*. Instead some people preferred *one*, and others *him*. As Araki & Yasui (1992) say, demonstratives are not used to refer to a person in object or complement position, although a sentence such as *That is my sister Ann*, where *that* is followed by the linking verb *is*, is possible.

As has been observed so far, many of native speakers' judgments do not support Channon's explanation that the more antecedent size becomes, the more the choice of *that* becomes. This fact, however, does not totally deny the validity of Channon's claim, because, interestingly, there is one informant who chose the pronouns in (3)–(5) just as Channon suggests. In the following section, some reasons will be explored why there are disagreements between native speakers' judgments.

### 3. A Cognitive Account

In this section, a different approach from the one given by Channon is suggested to account for the English speakers' choices in (3), (4) and (5) above. The following discussion confines itself to the selection of *it/that/them*. As a means of the following observations, these two cognitive viewpoints are proposed:

- (8) The speaker perceives lexical items in the antecedent as merged into the same group or he/she perceives each lexical item individually.<sup>3</sup>
- (9) The speaker focuses on the antecedent emphatically or neutrally.

The viewpoint in (8) is related to the choice between *it/that* and *them*. That is, the speaker would use *them*, not *it* or *that*, if he or she perceives the lexical items in the antecedent separately. The viewpoint in (9) was used in a series of my previous papers (i.e., Nakamura 1996, 1998, 2007, 2008) on the choice of *it* and *that*.<sup>4</sup> It can be taken to affect the choice between *it* and *that*. That is, the speaker would use *that* if he or she intends to put some focus on the information expressed in the antecedent. The choice of the three pronouns may differ from person to person since it depends on how he or she perceives the referent.

Using these two notions, I will try to examine (10)–(12) respectively. Firstly as for (10a), choosing *them* implies that the speaker refers to *a hamburger* and *a coke* separately. In (10b) *one* or *it* was preferred most. This is quite natural because *a hamburger and coffee* can be interpreted as a single dish, namely a group of things. As for (10c), most informants chose not *that* but *them*. This can be explained in terms of the notion in (8).

- (10) a. Larry had a hamburger and a coke, and I had that/it/them, too.
  - b. Larry had a hamburger and coffee, and I had that/it/them, too.
  - c. Larry had fried chicken, mashed potatoes and broccoli, and I had that/it/them, too.
- (Based on (2))

Next consider examples in (11). Unlike (10), each antecedent in (11) consists of one or more

lexical items referring to motion:

- (11) a. Don likes skiing. Steve likes it/that/them, too.
- b. Don likes skiing and skating. Steve likes that/it/them, too.
- c. Don likes skiing, skating, tobogganing and participating in winter sports in general.  
          Steve likes that/it/them, too.

(Based on ( 3 ))

One reason for *that* or *it* to be preferred in (11c) may be that *participating in winter sports in general* inclines us to understand skiing, skating and tobogganing as the same group of motion.

Lastly, let us observe example (12) where action(s) is/are expressed in the antecedent:

- (12) a. I like to sit by the fire, and Steve likes it/that/them, too.
- b. I like to sit by the fire, drink beer and relax, and Steve likes it/that/them, too.
- c. I like to sit by the fire, drink beer and relax on a cloud crisp afternoon after a good day  
          of skiing up in the Rockies, and Steve likes that/it/them, too.

(Based on ( 4 ))

Most informants judged not only *that* but *it* as acceptable in (12a, b, c). The difference between *it* and *that* in (12) is whether the antecedent is non-focused or focused. The prepositional phrase *after a good day of skiing up in the Rockies* in (12c) seems to incline my native informants to feel that sitting by the fire, drinking beer and relaxing are done at the same time. That is, sitting, drinking and relaxing can be understood as a group of actions. This may be the reason why the possibility of *them* in (12c) became lower than in (12a, b).

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

This monograph has argued that Channon's (1980) analysis of personal pronouns and their antecedents is not adequate to account for actual usage, and that some cognitive or semantic considerations outlined in (12) below should be taken to account for practical uses of *it/that/them*:

- (13) a. Either *it* or *that* could be used when the antecedent is perceived as belonging to the  
          same group into which lexical items are absorbed into. The difference between *it* and  
          *that* is whether the information expressed in the antecedent is nonfocused or focused.
- b. *Them* could be used when lexical items in the antecedent are perceived individually.

This alternative approach, I believe, has been able to work well in the analysis of *it/that/them* expressions given so far.

The examples discussed in this paper have been restricted to the ones constructed by Channon. Although these constructions are expected to occur only in rather restricted linguistic contexts,<sup>5</sup> it would be necessary to locate and consider real examples among a wide range of English data in order to consolidate my claim in this paper.<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Imanishi & Asano (1990) refer to Channon's study, but do not make a critical analysis of it.
- 2 Eleven native English speakers were asked in a questionnaire which of the pronouns they preferred in examples (3)–(7). The respondents consisted of four students at the University of Melbourne, two English language school teachers, three office workers, one university teacher, and one retired university teacher. Many of them (7) were from Australia, three from the USA, and one from Canada.
- 3 This notion seems to be parallel to Langacker's (1987) cognitive notions "entity" and "thing." A *thing* is a region which is characterized abstractly as a set of interconnected *entities*.
- 4 These previous papers of mine use the notions "emphatic pointing" and "neutral reference," which can be seen as basically similar to the one in (9).
- 5 One of the informants commented that Channon's examples all sound unnatural, and that native speakers would normally say, for example, *I did, too* instead of *I had that, too* in (3a).
- 6 A *that* example from actual conversation might be the one such as the following:
  - (i) I hear children ... growling like a polar bear, roaring like a lion, snorting like a hippopotamus, fluting like a flamingo, braying like a zebra, hissing like a boa constrictor, trumpeting like an elephant, snarling like leopard, yelping like a peacock, bellowing like a walrus ... *that's* what I hear. (Bill Martin, Jr & Eric Carle, *Polar Bear, Polar Bear, What Do You Hear?*) (Italics mine)

Here the antecedent is interpreted as various animal sounds expressed in the preceding linguistic context before *that*. Native speakers of English would disagree with the use of *they* or *it* in this context. What has been claimed in the present study leaves unexplained why *that* is chosen as the only acceptable pronoun in cases such as (i).

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