Section 13  personal pronouns and possessives

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language notes

‘Pronoun’ is something of a dustbin category, and terminology in this area can be confusing (see note below on possessives). Note that my, your etc are determiners as well as being pronouns; they occupy the same position in noun phrases as articles or demonstratives. However, it is more convenient to deal with them in this Section.

possible further activities

Cartoons  Some explanation may be needed here. Not all students will be familiar with the classical notion of the gods hurling thunderbolts at humanity. And perhaps not everyone will realise that the woman in the second cartoon is trying to become a writer.

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language notes

In languages with grammatical gender, third-person possessives may be masculine or feminine according to the gender of the following noun, and not the possessor (as in English):

*Jack’s much nicer than her sister.
*Julie and his husband spent the weekend with us.

Students may occasionally use articles together with my, your etc if this happens in their mother tongue:

*a my friend  *the my car

Another elementary mistake is to give possessives plural forms:

*I know theirs parents very well.

Students often put apostrophes in yours, ours and theirs, and confuse whose and who’s or its and it’s. (Understandably, because possessive nouns have apostrophes.) Many native speakers make similar mistakes.

*’Who’s is that?’  *’Its mine.’

possible further activities

Memory test  If you think it is useful for students to have a clear explicit knowledge of this aspect of English grammar, you could ask them, after completing the table in Exercise 1, to reproduce it from memory.

An asterisk (*) indicates an incorrect form or use.  ➔ Section 13 continues
language notes

Terminology relating to possessives is generally unclear and confusing. Often my, your etc are called ‘possessive adjectives’, and mine, yours etc are called ‘possessive pronouns.’ In fact, the my-series function as determiners, not adjectives, in noun phrases (like articles and demonstratives). And both my etc and mine etc are pronouns. My stands for the noun phrase ‘the speaker’s’; and mine stands for ‘the speaker’s possession’ (so it is in fact a kind of double pronoun). None of this is of any practical importance as far as intermediate students are concerned.

The choice between possessives and articles with words for parts of the body and clothes is complicated; at this level, a simple explanation and some examples of typical usage are all that is needed.

possible further activities

Lying to the teacher  Turn your back on the class. Some or all of them put possessions on your desk. You turn back, pick them up one by one, and ask ‘Whose is this?’ Three or more students tell you, but they don’t necessarily tell you the truth.

‘It’s his.’‘It’s hers.’‘It’s mine.’

You try to decide whose the thing is, and give your answer (‘It’s yours.’) The students tell you if you’ve got it right.

Personalisation: a … of mine  Ask students to complete the following sentences:
- A friend of mine …
- Two friends of mine …
- Three friends of mine …
- Four friends of mine …

Can they go any further?

Personalisation: own  Ask students to complete this sentence:
- I’ll never forget the first time I had a … of my own.

Internet  Can students find any interesting sentences on the internet containing the expression “a friend of mine”?

A useful motto  Students may be amused by the motto attributed to selfish people: ‘What’s yours is mine, and what’s mine’s my own’. Do they know anybody like that?

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language notes

In some languages, subject and object pronouns are often left out when they are not completely necessary. This is unusual in English, though it happens sometimes in informal speech. Typical mistakes:

*Is raining again.
‘More potatoes?’ ‘No, thanks. *Have enough.’
‘She likes parties, but I don’t like.’

The informal use of me etc in subject complements (‘It’s me again’) and in one-word answers (‘Who said that?’ ‘Her.’) may be strange for students whose mother tongues have the equivalent of I etc in these contexts:

‘Who’s that?’ (‘It’s l.’ or ‘I am.’

➔ Section 13 continues
In double subjects and objects containing pronouns, the I/me distinction often breaks down completely:

John and me saw a great film yesterday.

All debts are cleared between you and I. (Shakespeare: Merchant of Venice)

These are not mistakes, although some native speakers believe they are wrong. They are simply examples of informal standard spoken usage. We mention the point here because it may be of interest, but for teaching purposes it is best left until a more advanced level.

In some languages, ordinary nouns have grammatical gender. Even advanced students may occasionally use he or she for things (especially living creatures), reflecting the mother-tongue gender.

*Look at that spider! She’s horrible!

possible further activities

‘Me’ Ask questions like the following. Students answer ‘Me’ or ‘Not me’.

Who likes fish?
Who speaks [name of language]?
Who was born in March?
Who can drive?
Who goes to bed late?
Who gets up early at weekends?
Who goes skiing?
Who’s been to the US?

Then, if you like, you can ask the questions all over again and ask for more complete short answers (‘I do’, ‘I was’, ‘I can’, ‘I don’t’ etc).

Using ‘it’ Ask students to write or say answers beginning with ‘It …’ to the following questions:

Is your country [or name of other country] hot in summer?
What’s the weather like today?
How far is it from your house to the nearest station/airport/ …?

Geography quiz Name some countries, and ask students to write sentences about where they are, beginning ‘It …’. Like this:

‘Belgium’ – ‘It’s next to Holland.’

‘Scotland’ – ‘It’s north of England.’

Get students to continue the quiz themselves. You can use the opportunity to revise and teach the English names of some countries.

Internet Ask students to use the internet to find out what the weather is like in a country of your choice (or their choice), and to write two or three sentences about it beginning with It.

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language notes

Some verbs for things that people do for themselves are not normally reflexive in English, but may be reflexive in the students’ mother tongue(s). Common examples: wash, shave, dress, get up, go to bed, wonder, feel.

Some students’ languages may use a structure with a reflexive pronoun in cases where English uses a passive: the equivalent, for instance, of ‘English speaks itself here’.

After prepositions, we often use an ordinary personal pronoun even if the meaning is reflexive:

She takes her dog everywhere with her. (not *… everywhere with herself.)

This point is not dealt with at this level.
possible further activities

*Mime*  Give some individuals and some pairs of students cards with instructions telling them to do things to themselves. Teach any new vocabulary in advance. For example: talk to yourself, write on yourselves, look at yourself, kill yourself, kick yourselves, scratch yourselves, kiss yourself, sing to yourself, read to yourselves, stroke yourselves, hit yourself, shout at yourself

Students act out what is on their cards; the others have to say what it is. (‘He’s talking to himself.’ ‘They’re scratching themselves.’)

Then put students in pairs or groups, and do a similar activity, but with ‘each other’ on the cards instead of reflexives.

Not all of these actions (e.g. *kiss each other*), of course, would be appropriate for all types of class or cultural context.

*Internet: checking non-reflexives*  Get students to do an internet search to check the relative frequency of “He shaved himself quickly” and “He shaved quickly”. Get them to do the same for “They washed themselves quickly” and “They washed quickly”. What about “They dressed themselves”/ “They got dressed”?

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language notes

Singular indefinite *they/them/their* (as in ‘Somebody has forgotten their umbrella.’) is normal in informal English, and has been for centuries. It is a useful, less clumsy alternative to *he or she* etc. Some people believe, wrongly, that it is incorrect.

possible further activities

*Advice*  Get students to complete one or more of the following pieces of advice:

You should always ... before you ...
You should always ... when you ...
One should always ... after one ...
One should never ...

*History*  Get students to complete one or more of the following sentences:

In the ... century they ...
I'm glad I didn't live in the ... century, because they ...
I wish I had lived in the ... century, because they ...

*Complaints*  Do students have any criticisms of the local or national government? Get them to write sentences beginning ‘They ...’.