Pronouns (Subject, Object and Possessive)

Lecture notes · English Grammar Foundations · Module 1: Words and sentences

Learning objectives

O1	Explain what a pronoun does and why we use it, including first, second and third person.
O2	Use subject pronouns before the verb and object pronouns after verbs and prepositions.
O3	Show possession with possessive adjectives (before a noun) and possessive pronouns (standing alone), without apostrophes.
O4	Avoid common pronoun mistakes: me and him went, between you and I, its / it's, your / you're, their / they're / there, unclear reference.

Prerequisites: KN-GEN-ENG-C01-M01-T01-L01 (parts of speech) and KN-GEN-ENG-C01-M01-T02-L01 (singular and plural).

Contents: 1. What a pronoun does · 2. Person and number · 3. Subject and object pronouns · 4. Possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns · 5. Apostrophes and sound-alikes · 6. Common mistakes and how to fix them · Worked examples · Summary · References

1. What a pronoun does

A pronoun stands in for a noun so that we do not repeat it: 'Sam lost his keys, so he called his sister' instead of 'Sam lost Sam's keys, so Sam called Sam's sister.' The noun a pronoun refers back to is called its antecedent (here: Sam).

Pronouns change form according to their job in the sentence. The same person can be he (doing the action), him (receiving it) or his (owning something).

2. Person and number

First person is the speaker: I (one), we (more than one). Second person is the listener: you (one or more; English uses the same word). Third person is everyone and everything else: he, she, it (one), they (more than one).

They can also refer to one person whose gender is unknown or not important: 'If a student is late, they should sign in.' This use has a long history and is accepted by modern dictionaries and style guides. Some people also use they for themselves; respect the pronouns a person asks you to use.

3. Subject and object pronouns

Subject pronouns (I, you, he, she, it, we, they) do the action and usually come before the verb: She plays football. They live in Lagos.

Object pronouns (me, you, him, her, it, us, them) receive the action and come after the verb: Maria called him. They also come after prepositions (with, for, to, between, about, from): Come with me. This is for her.

Test: Who or what does the action? That is the subject. Who or what receives it, or follows a preposition? That is the object.

4. Possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns

Possessive adjectives (also called possessive determiners) go before a noun: my bag, your phone, his car, her book, its tail, our house, their teacher.

Possessive pronouns stand alone, replacing the possessive adjective and its noun: mine, yours, his, hers, ours, theirs. 'This bag is mine' = 'This bag is my bag.' Its is almost never used alone.

The complete table (subject / object / possessive adjective / possessive pronoun): I / me / my / mine; you / you / your / yours; he / him / his / his; she / her / her / hers; it / it / its / (rare); we / us / our / ours; they / them / their / theirs.

5. Apostrophes and sound-alikes

Possessive pronouns and possessive adjectives never take an apostrophe: hers, yours, ours, theirs, its. (Nouns do: Sam's keys.)

it's = it is or it has (It's raining; It's been a long day). its = belonging to it (The dog wagged its tail). Test: replace with 'it is'; if the sentence still works, write it's.

you're = you are; your = belonging to you. they're = they are; their = belonging to them; there = a place (or 'there is / there are').

6. Common mistakes and how to fix them

Two subjects: 'Me and him went' 'He and I went.' Remove the other person to test: 'I went' (not 'me went'). Politeness: put yourself last.

After a preposition: 'between you and I' 'between you and me'; 'for my sister and I' 'for my sister and me'. Test: 'for me' (not 'for I').

Unclear reference: 'Anna told Lisa that she had won' could mean either. Rewrite with a name or direct speech.

Reflexive pronouns

When the subject and the object are the same person, use a reflexive pronoun: myself, yourself / yourselves, himself, herself, itself, ourselves, themselves. I hurt myself. They enjoyed themselves.

Reflexives also add emphasis: 'I made it myself.' Do not use them as ordinary subjects or objects: 'Please contact me' (not 'Please contact myself').

After 'than', 'as' and 'be'

In everyday English we use object pronouns after than and as: 'She is taller than me.' In formal English, a subject pronoun plus verb is preferred: 'She is taller than I am.'

After be, everyday English says 'It's me'; very formal English says 'It is I'. Both are understood; choose the everyday form in conversation.

Generic 'you' and 'one'

You can mean people in general: 'You should drink water every day.' The formal equivalent is one: 'One should drink water every day.' Generic you is far more common.

Preview: who and whom

Who works like a subject pronoun and whom like an object pronoun: 'Who called?' (he called) / 'Whom did you call?' (you called him). In everyday English, who is often used for both; whom is common after prepositions in formal writing: 'To whom it may concern'.

A method for choosing the right form

1. Is the word before the verb, doing the action? Use the subject form. 2. Is it after a verb or a preposition? Use the object form. 3. Does it show ownership before a noun? Use a possessive adjective. 4. Does it show ownership with no noun after it? Use a possessive pronoun. 5. Are the subject and object the same person? Use a reflexive. 6. Check: no apostrophe in any possessive; it's only if 'it is / it has' fits.

Example: '(I / me) and Tom finished (our / ours) project, and the teacher gave (we / us) a prize.' 'Tom and I finished our project, and the teacher gave us a prize.'

Real-world application: emails and forms

Emails: 'Thank you for your message. My colleague and I will send you our report on Monday. If you have any questions, please contact me.'

Forms often ask for 'your name' (possessive adjective) and say 'the information you provide' (subject you). Polite requests use you and your: 'Could you send me your address?'

Worked examples

Worked example 1: choosing subject or object

Choose the correct pronoun: (a) (They / Them) invited (we / us) to dinner. (b) Can you help (I / me)? (c) (She / Her) and her brother are twins.

Step 1. (a) The first gap is before the verb 'invited' and does the action They. The second receives the action us. They invited us to dinner.

Step 2. (b) After the verb 'help' object form: Can you help me?

Step 3. (c) Remove 'and her brother': 'She is a twin' (not 'Her is') She and her brother are twins.

Worked example 2: my or mine?

Complete: (a) Is this ___ pen? — No, ___ is blue. (Answer as the speaker, 'I'.) (b) Their house is big, but ___ is bigger. (we)

Step 1. (a) Before the noun 'pen' possessive adjective: 'Is this your pen?' Standing alone possessive pronoun: 'No, mine is blue.'

Step 2. (b) Standing alone, replacing 'our house' ours: 'Their house is big, but ours is bigger.'

Worked example 3: apostrophe check

Correct the message: 'Its a great day! The team won it's match, and the trophy is their's. Your all invited to there party.'

Step 1. 'Its a great day' 'It is a great day' fits It's a great day!

Step 2. 'won it's match' 'it is match' does not fit its match.

Step 3. 'their's' theirs (no apostrophe in possessive pronouns).

Step 4. 'Your all invited' 'you are all invited' fits You're all invited.

Step 5. 'to there party' belonging to them their party. Corrected: 'It's a great day! The team won its match, and the trophy is theirs. You're all invited to their party.'

Worked example 4: removing an unclear pronoun

Rewrite so the meaning is clear: 'When Ravi met Tom, he gave him his book.'

Step 1. Problem: he, him and his could each point to Ravi or Tom.

Step 2. Decide the meaning, then use a name where needed: 'When Ravi met Tom, Ravi gave Tom his own book back.' or 'When Ravi met Tom, Tom gave Ravi a book.'

Summary

• Pronouns replace nouns; person tells us the role: 1st speaker, 2nd listener, 3rd everyone else.

• Subject pronouns (I, he, she, we, they) do the action and come before the verb.

• Object pronouns (me, him, her, us, them) come after verbs and prepositions.

• Possessive adjectives (my, their) go before a noun; possessive pronouns (mine, theirs) stand alone.

• No apostrophes in possessives; its = of it, it's = it is / it has; your / you're; their / they're / there.

References

References: KN-GEN-ENG-C01-M01-T03-L01
- Swan, M. (2016). *Practical English Usage* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press. Entries on personal pronouns (subject and object forms), possessives (*my / mine*), *its / it's*, and singular *they*.
- Cambridge Dictionary, *English Grammar Today*: "Pronouns: personal (I, me, you, him, it, they, etc.)" and "Pronouns: possessive (my, mine, your, yours, etc.)" (dictionary.cambridge.org, grammar section).

- Merriam-Webster and Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, usage notes on *they* used for one person of unknown or unspecified gender (long-established use).
- Council of Europe (2020). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Companion Volume*. Grammatical accuracy descriptors A1-A2 (level guidance only).
Terminology: "possessive adjective" (traditional) and "possessive determiner" (modern grammars) name the same words (my, your, his, her, its, our, their); both terms are given in the lesson.
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All example sentences are original. 'Possessive adjective' (traditional) and 'possessive determiner' (modern) name the same words.