



Investigating the expression of group reference

Shorter Article

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Introduction

We normally think of 'plural' in English in terms of reference to more than one, as in the use of the word *dogs* to refer to more than one *dog*. This is described as the 'ordinary' or 'additive' plural, which has referential homogeneity in the sense that every member of the group referenced by *dogs* is a *dog*. In contrast, there is another type of plural which is used for human groups and has referential heterogeneity, that is, each member of the referenced group is a separate individual.¹ In addition, each of those members is associated in some way, typically as family, friend or habitual companion, with a prominent member of the group, hence the term 'associative' plural for the construction. The following description is from Moravcsik (2003).

Associative plurals will be taken to be constructions whose meaning is 'X and X's associate(s),' where all members are individuals, X is the focal referent, and the associate(s) form a group centering around X. (pp. 470–471)

Moravcsik (2003: 469) provides examples of the construction from Japanese, as in (1), and from Mandarin Chinese in (2). As illustrated in these two examples, the focal referent is realized as a definite human individual with a proper name, typically a given name rather than a family name, (e.g. *Tanaka* and *Zhangsan*), but can also be a definite kinship term (e.g., *ya* 'mother'), as in (3) from the Papuan language Sawila (Mauri & Sansò, 2020: 18), or a title noun such as teacher, priest or leader (e.g., *fiahá* 'chief') as in (4), from the West African language, Ewe, cited in Vassilieva (2005: 10).

- (1) *Tanaka-tachi* ('Tanaka and his family or friends or associates')
- (2) *Zhangsan tāmen* ('Zhangsan and his group')
- (3) *ni-ya nanna* ('my mother and her sisters')
- (4) *fiahá-wo* ('the chief and his retinue')

The forms *tachi*, *tāmen*, *nanna* and *wo* do not have a counterpart in the morphology of English with a similar function, which gives rise to the question: how do English speakers go about expressing the functional equivalent of this type of group reference? Do they always have to create an expression consisting of a conjunction and a phrase with nouns such as *associates* or *friends* as in the translations here or are there other ways to mark this type of plural? This paper aims to provide an answer to those questions through an investigation of some of the linguistic features typically found in the marking of associative plurals in other languages and identifying the use of comparable features in varieties of the English language.

Associative plural constructions

Associative plural constructions are reported to be widespread in the languages of Africa, Asia, Australia, and the Pacific, according to a survey by Daniel and Moravcsik (2013), who comment on the 'near absence of associative plurals in [the languages of] Western Europe' (p. 153), including English. It should be noted that almost half of the languages in the survey use the same grammatical form as a suffix in both additive and associative plurals. For example, Turkish has a suffix *-ler* which, in the expression *Mehmetler* can be interpreted as 'many people called Mehmet,' essentially an additive plural, or 'Mehmet and his family,' an associative plural, as described in Vassilieva (2005: 1).² Arriving at the appropriate interpretation will depend on the

context, as is the case for all associative plurals, which speakers use with the pragmatic assumption that ‘you know who I mean.’ Vassilieva (2005: 8) also notes that the same grammatical form may be used for both types of plurals, but in a different position in the structure of the noun phrase. In Tok Pisin, spoken in Papua New Guinea, a distinction can be made between using *ol* (‘all’) as an additive plural *ol pater* (‘priests’) and an associative plural *pater ol* (‘priest and his congregation’). This use of *ol* after the noun has counterparts in a number of languages which are analyzed by Mauri and Sansò (2020: 18) as derivatives of the universal quantifier meaning ‘all, every,’ a source we will return to as a possible feature of associative plural marking in English.

Perhaps the most transparent form of group reference in English, as in the translations of (1) – (4), is the use of a conjoined noun phrase containing lexical items that describe the relationship involved. One of the earliest English expressions that can be interpreted as indicating group membership is illustrated in (5), from the work of Ælfric, written around the year 1000. This extract is cited by Buchstaller and Traugott (2006: 351) from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) Online. The focal referent (*he*) in example (5) is Satan.

- (5) *þa wearð he & ealle his geferan forcūþran*
 (‘then became he and all his companions wicked’) [ÆLFRIC *Catholic Homilies* 1st Ser. (Royal) 1997. I. 180 OED]

The lexicalization of the group as ‘companions,’ as in (5), has counterparts in modern English, such as *gang* in (6) and *mob* in (7), both examples from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA). It is noticeable that this type of group reference is not typically based on the first name of the focal referent.

- (6) *Nancy Pelosi and her gang are a disgrace*
 (7) *the ditch that Obama and his mob have already put us in*

The term *mob*, without a conjunction or a possessive adjective (or a negative meaning), is reported to be a feature of group reference in Kriol, an English-based Creole spoken in Western Australia, as in (8), cited in Michaelis et al. (2013a), while *guys* fulfills a similar role in Hawai‘i Creole English, as shown in (9) from Tonouchi (2001).

- (8) *les kripap la Sherin mob* (‘let’s creep up on Sharon and her friends’)
 (9) *she axed me wea my mom guys went* (‘she asked me where my mom and her group went’)

Examples (5) – (9) provide some evidence that a type of associative plural can be expressed in English varieties through the use of nouns with group reference, in phrase-final position, with and without a conjunction. To discover if there are other possibilities, we will look more carefully at the linguistic features used in established associative plural constructions and, through analogy, try to identify similar features in English.

The reported absence of associative plural constructions in Western European languages has had a predictable effect on any attempt to carry out research on the topic, which may be compounded by reports of the relatively low frequency of these constructions even in those languages that have them. As Vassilieva has pointed out, ‘data on associatives are very hard to come by, since this construction is often restricted to the colloquial register of a language and is therefore rarely mentioned in descriptive grammars’ (2005: 5). Low frequency and the fact that potential instantiations of the constructions may still be the subject of discovery are two factors operating against a quantitative study of the phenomenon. As a result, the current report is based on a qualitative investigation which begins with the identification of characteristic features of associative constructions already reported in reference works such as *The World Atlas of Language Structures* (Dryer & Haspelmath, 2013), *The Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures* (Michaelis et al., 2013b) and studies of plural constructions such as Corbett (2000), Corbett and Mithun (1996), Iljic (2002), Moravcsik (2003), Mauri and Sansò (2019) and Vassilieva (2005). Once we identified some characteristic features, we were able to search through major English corpora such as the *British National Corpus* (BNC), the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) (Davies, 2008), *Early English Books Online* (EEBO) and the *Oxford English Dictionary* Online (OED) 3rd edition, in an effort to identify likely examples of associative plural marking.

Characteristic features

As already noted, associative plural constructions involve a proper name indicating the focal human referent plus expressions that identify the group members in a close relationship with that referent. In one of the few observations in the linguistic literature concerning the possibility of associative plural marking in English, Moravcsik notes that ‘some dialects of English have ‘X and (X’s) associated person(s)’ as in *John ‘n them*’ (2003: 470). Although Moravcsik doesn’t explore this type of marking in English any further, she does note the frequency with which forms derived from third person plural pronouns corresponding to *them* occur in a range of languages.

In Chinese, according to Zhang (2008), the morpheme *-men* not only attaches to singular pronouns to create plurals (e.g. *tā* = third person singular, *tāmen* = third person plural), it can also be used to mark a group associated with an individual, as in *XiaoQiangmen* (‘XiaoQiang and others related to him’) or, in the fuller form *Zhangsan tāmen*, included in (2) earlier. Vassilieva (2005: 32) cites examples of markers of associated group reference from other languages with similar origins in plural pronouns. In Papuan Malay, *dong* (third person plural) can be used in reference to *Niko dong* (‘Niko them’ or ‘Niko and his friend(s)’) and in Afrikaans, where the phrase *oom-hulle* (literally ‘uncle-them’), used as an associative plural (‘uncle and others with him’), includes an archaic third person plural object form, attached to the focal referent (Besten, 1996). In a more recent English study, Mauri and Sansò (2019: 615, 618) also pointed to

the phrase *and them*, attached to an individual's first name, as a possible associative plural marker, as in (10). They also proposed that the phrase *and all* may be used for group reference when attached to a proper name, as in (11).

- (10) Max **and them** have all done really great and have worked so hard
 (11) I just wanted to give my props to Jackson **and all**

Examples of *and all* attached to a proper name or title turn out to be rather rare, with some items such as *Mom*, *tipsy uncle Fred* and *all* potentially indicating group reference listed in COCA, but there are none in the other corpora. However, forms similar to the quantifier *all* do feature in associative plural constructions. We have already noted the use of a version of *all* without a conjunction in Tok Pisin, as in *pater ol*, or *Sandy ol laik go long fil* ('Sandy and her group want to go to the field') with an associative function. With these clues, we were able to search for examples of *them* and *all* attached to human proper names, with or without the conjunction *and*, as possible indications of associative plural marking in English.

and (all) them

One of the earliest constructions incorporating both *all* and *them*, dating to the 15th century, may serve to illustrate the origin of one form of group reference through additional information (*of his blood*) that identifies the family connection more explicitly, as in (12).

- (12) *he would doo slee the kynge Creon **and all them** of his blood*
 [1474 William Caxton *Raoul le ffeure* EEBO]

In the historical record we also found examples with an alternative arrangement of the constituents (*and them all*), as in (13), from the 17th century.

- (13) *he would from thenceforth be a more bitter Enemie towards St. Cuthbert **and them all** than ever he was before*
 [1657 William Prynne *The good fundamental liberties* EEBO]

However, use of this construction is less common, according to the OED, BNC and COCA, than the phrase *and all them*, as in expressions such as *Spiderman and all them* referring to a group of cartoon super heroes and *Jay-Z and all them* identifying a group of rap performers. Another example from contemporary American English (COCA) provides a good illustration of a definite group reference in (14).

- (14) *Let LeBron **and all them** know I'll come down and I'll tattoo them all for free*

In (14), from a newspaper article, the reference is to a particular group of basketball players, the Los Angeles Lakers (and not all basketball players), as a team that had just won a national championship, with their most famous

player (LeBron James) as the focal referent, in a clear example of associative plural marking.

There are also examples of group reference with the simpler phrase *and them* in COCA, as in (15) referencing a particular group of schoolchildren and (16) talking about a family group.

- (15) *That's Shay-Shay **and them**. Remember? From middle school.*
 (16) *Sometimes granma tell me stuff about grandpa **and them***

A reduced version of this construction (without the conjunction) has been noted in studies of English varieties where forms of associative plural marking using *dem*, as in (17) from Jamaican Creole and *nem*, as in (18) from African American English, both cited in Michaelis et al. (2013a), appear to have developed from third person plural pronouns.

- (17) *Jan **dem** outa duo* ('John and his friends are outside')
 (18) *Felicia **nem** done gone* ('Felicia and her friends/family have gone already')

While versions of *and (all) them* can be found in both British and American English, there is another structure that is distinctly British.

and (all) that (lot)

As detailed in Cheshire (2007) and Overstreet & Yule (2021), the phrase *and that* is used with a wide range of functions, including associative plural marking, as illustrated in (19) from British English (Stenström, Andersen & Hasund, 2002: 102).

- (19) *Where did Chantal **and that** go?*

Although it is less common to find the singular pronoun *that* rather than *them* being used as part of a phrase indicating human reference, it is clear that, in the case of (19), a group of people associated with *Chantal* is being referenced in a phrase that is functioning as a plural subject in the utterance.

We can also include *all*, as in the phrase *and all that*, which has many functions in British English, including, in some rare cases, associative plural marking, as in (20). We say 'rare' because there are no examples of the phrase attached to a proper name or a title listed in the OED or EEBO. Example (20) is from the BNC.

- (20) *They came back with Gillian **and all that** and they stayed*

There is also evidence from the BNC that another pair of related expressions is being used for group reference. These are *and that lot*, as in (21), and *and all that lot*, as in (22).

- (21) *Mussy **and that lot** had just watched American werewolf*
 (22) *She used to go around with Lisa and Vicky **and all that lot***

Support for the analysis of these expressions as associative plural markers can be found in an example such as (23)

Table 1. Associative plural marking in English varieties

group nouns	Obama and his mob Sherin mob my mom guys	American English Kriol (Australia) Hawai'i Creole English
all/them	Sandy ol St. Cuthbert and them all LeBron and all them Shay-Shay and them Jan dem Felicia nem	Tok Pisin (Papua New Guinea) British English American English American English Jamaican Creole African American English
(all) that (lot)	Chantal and that Gillian and all that Pierre and that lot Vicky and all that lot	British English British English British English British English

from Stenström et al. (2002: 102) where the phrases are not only repeated but are also paraphrased with another form of group reference.

- (23) *What pissed me off is, is he's hanging about with Pierre **and that lot** now right, but when you talk about Pierre **and that lot** to him it's, oh they're a bunch of chiefs.*

In (23), the speaker provides a collective phrase (*bunch of chiefs*) indicating group reference as an alternative way of talking about *Pierre and that lot*, supporting an analysis of the latter phrase as an associative plural.

Conclusion

In this report, we began with the observation that English is not included in the list of languages of the world in which associative plural structures have been identified. We reported on the typical patterns of associative plural marking in a number of those languages, leading to the identification of 'human focal referent with a first name or title' plus 'group reference,' as well as 'phrase-final,' 'third person plural,' and 'universal quantifier' as common features that provided clues in the search for a comparable structure in English. We discussed forms of group reference incorporating lexical items for groups and also adjunctive phrases incorporating the morphemes *them* and *all*, leading to the more focused analysis of the phrase-final *and (all) them* as an expression that is used, though not exclusively, as an associative plural marker in contemporary English. We also identified a structural template *and (all) that (lot)* that is used, again not exclusively, to express associative plural reference in British English. These findings are summarized

in Table 1, to which readers may be able to add further examples from their own experience. We also include a distributional review of the forms in each corpus in Table 2.³

Although the data we have discussed do not provide us with specialized morphemes or phrases that are exclusively used for associative plural marking in English, we believe that we have introduced enough evidence to support a reconsideration of the phenomenon and a proposal that English should be added to the list of languages that exhibit associative plural marking.

Notes

1 There is another related construction described by Daniel and Moravcsik (2013) as a 'simulative plural' which also has referential heterogeneity and consists of a noun X plus a similarity marker meaning 'X and similar things,' typically used with non-human and inanimate nouns. English examples are often constructed with general extenders including the word *like*, as in *I love roasts and things like that* (Overstreet, 2020).

2 In Turkish, the potential ambiguity of reference is resolved when a possessive marker is added to the phrase, creating a distinct word order difference. According to Cinque (2018:496), citing Görgülü (2011), the structure in *abi-ler-im* ('brother-plural-first person singular possessive') is interpreted as 'my brothers,' but *abi-m-ler* refers to 'my brother and his family/friends/associates.'

3 Table 2 presents the numbers of the expressions in the four corpora, which we should recognize as different in size, historical period, and in the nature of registers sampled. We intend no comparison and simply present these numbers in support of the idea that associative plural marking has been taking place in English for some time.

Corpora consulted (accessed on July 20th, 2023)

BNC = British National Corpus. <https://www.english-corpora.org/bnc/>
COCA = Corpus of Contemporary American English. <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>

Table 2. Distribution of associative plural markers in four English corpora

	<i>and them</i>	<i>and them all</i>	<i>and all them</i>	<i>and that</i>	<i>and all that</i>	<i>and that lot</i>	<i>and all that lot</i>
OED	8	0	5	0	0	1	0
BNC	22	0	4	0	2	24	3
EEBO	42	8	10	0	0	0	0
COCA	11	2	16	2	2	0	0

EEBO = Early English Books Online. <https://www.english-corpora.org/eebo/>
 OED = Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd edn. online. <http://www.oed.com/>

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