

Pronoun Origins: Early or late, simple or complex?

Martin Edwardes

King's College London

martin.edwardes@btopenworld.com

Abstract

Pronouns seem to express the components of communication (the sender, receiver and referent) in reduced terms, acting as placeholders for more complex noun meanings. For von Humboldt (1836), pronouns appeared early in the genesis of grammar, allowing the expression of communicator roles before personal nominalisation began. They appeared in the order of first person (the sender), second person (the receiver) and third person (the content of the utterance). For Heine and Kuteva (2007), pronouns emerged from noun usage as desemantised and decategorised placemarkers for nouns. The three persons probably emerged together – and in quite different ways in different languages.

Pronouns are devalued in current grammars. For Hurford (1994), “A pronoun is typically a little word that stands in place of a noun phrase”. It is grammatically more constrained than a noun phrase, and therefore simpler; and the different natures of the three persons is trivial. Hudson (1998), using a very different approach to grammar, nonetheless largely agrees with Hurford. Evans and Green (2006), give only two pages on the role of pronouns in cognitive linguistics, and largely agree with Hurford and Hudson about their nature.

Benveniste (1970) sees first and second person pronouns as different from third person: “I” and “you” reflect roles in the communicative act, the third person is just part of the signal. Benveniste therefore describes the third person as a “non-person”. Van Hoek (2007) builds a similar model from a cognitive linguistics viewpoint, discussing the “on-stage” and “offstage” nature of pronouns. She sees the first and second person as representative of the actual sender and receiver, who are able to share a view of the utterance as a performance which may include themselves. The third person, in contrast, is “held at arm’s length”.

This paper uses van Hoek (2007) and Edwardes (2014) to explore the origins of pronouns. It proposes that pronouns come from the exchange of social models, and they represent a meta-awareness of the communication act. They require hierarchical cognitive modelling: the communication model (sender-signal-receiver) is viewed by the sender and receiver as if they are outside the communication, and their communicative roles are then represented within the signal (for example, as actor-action-patient). I model myself as the sender or receiver, and then model the sender or receiver modelling themselves within the signal – our models of me and you can also model me and you. Pronouns allow the different modelling levels to be collapsed into a single conceptual whole of selfhood.

The paper discusses the capacity to model selves within modelled selves, and its role within the genesis of language. It shows that pronouns represent a sophisticated form of cognition which probably came relatively late in language genesis.

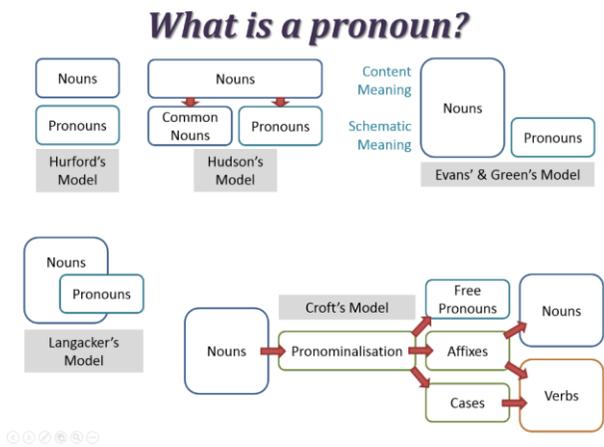
The nature of pronouns

What is a pronoun? For what appears to be a closed-class, constrained group of lexical items, the answer is surprisingly complex. Even the more traditional models of grammar cannot agree on a single definition. For instance, while Jim Hurford (1994,

pp202-206) and Dick Hudson (1998, pp33-34) largely agree on the role and nature of pronouns as placeholders for noun phrases, their descriptions differ in one vital detail: for Hurford, a pronoun stands in place of a noun phrase, but it is a different thing from the noun phrase it represents; for Hudson, their roles are too similar for them to be considered separately, so “pronouns are nouns, alongside common nouns”.

For cognitive linguistics, the situation is more subtle. Vyv Evans & Melanie Green say “pronouns can be viewed as a separate category from nouns because they belong to a closed class and because they provide what cognitive linguists call **schematic meaning** rather than **content meaning**” (2006, p490, their emphasis). They illustrate this by saying you can draw your favourite cup without seeing it, but you cannot draw “it” without knowing the object to which “it” refers. Pronouns rely on the pre-existence of nouns for their semantic potential.

In another cognitive approach, Ronald Langacker (2008, pp312-316) sees pronouns as occupying both their own class and the noun class, and he contrasts the usages of “one” and “it” in English to show this dual nature. For instance, in the two constructs, **The car is fast; I want it** and **the car is fast; I want one**, “it” refers directly to the noun phrase it is pronominalizing, while “one” refers to an object sharing identifiable features with the noun phrase, but not the object in the noun phrase itself. “One” refers and place-marks, but it does not represent something else, it represents itself.



Slide 1: What is a pronoun?

William Croft (2001, p271) takes a less structural approach to pronouns. Indeed, rather than referring to pronouns as a word class, he talks about pronominalisation as a process. He sees pronouns as just one way in which languages pronominalise, with case relations and affixation being other ways of achieving the same effect. This raises

an issue that should not be forgotten in any discussion of pronouns: there is a syntactic continuum between free pronouns, affixes and cases. Even English, a strongly analytic language, uses affixation on common verbs (I'm/I've/I'll; You're/You've/You'll; he's/he's/he'll; etc). It is a salutary reminder that the classification of language effects into word classes is seldom simple and uniform, even in a single language. Nonetheless, and for concision, this paper will ignore this important fact, and instead adopt the view that pronominal verb cases are similar to affixation, and affixation is just a form of elision. It will not address the rich variety that exists in the real world.

Pronouns as language roles

However, while the definitions given above are all good descriptions of pronouns as grammatical features of language, they do not address all the linguistic roles that pronouns represent. A pronoun is not just a placeholder for a noun, or not just another noun, it represents a “contract of meaning” between the sender and receiver. The pronoun it is part of, and an outcome of, the negotiation to meaning that language facilitates; and it is therefore another tool of social cognition, representing something special about the social relationships which language describes and enables.

And when I say “something special”, I should say “several things special”. The term **pronoun** encourages us to see pronouns as cases within a general rule; but there seems to be no general rule governing the nature of pronouns. Like the word “insect”, “pronoun” is a hyponym for a quite disparate group of things. Pronouns, like insects, have different forms, functions, roles and environments. Like insects, you can give a generic description of pronouns as a group, but only specific descriptions of what each different pronoun does. In terms of form and function, the first person singular is as different from the third person plural as a stag beetle is from a honey bee.

We see this difference reflected in the pronouns of different languages. The second person in Spanish is subdivided into familiar and polite forms, and the polite form co-identifies grammatically with the third person. The same thing happens in German, but the division into familiar and polite is subtly different. In French, the polite singular uses the same form and grammar as the familiar plural; while in English, singular and plural, polite and familiar, are collapsed into a single form.

In contrast to the second person, the third person is subject to gender differentiation, which varies from language to language. The weirdness of English, with three singular genders (she, he, it) collapsing into a single plural gender (they), is just one case in point. In languages around the world, there seems to be a common – although not universal – approximate division of third person forms into genders (feminine, neuter and masculine, and sometimes more) and types (people and other animals, together forming a superordinate group of animate things; and inanimate concrete objects and abstract things, together forming a superordinate group of inanimate things). This

gender and type division usually occurs first in the noun forms of a language and is then extended to the pronoun forms by association. Unusually, the English third-person uses genders for its pronouns yet its nouns are largely genderless; but this is because the pronouns represent a relict grammatical effect from older forms of the language. How each individual language divides up the pronoun landscape varies considerably, however, and it does not always correspond to the nominal subdivisions presented here.

Pronoun formations

SECOND PERSON		Spanish		French		English	
Familiar Singular	Polite Singular	Tú	Usted	Tu	Vous	You	You
Familiar Plural	Polite Plural	Vosotros	Ustedes	Vous	Vous	You	You

THIRD PERSON & GENDER		Feminine	Neuter	Masculine
Animate	Person	Woman	Child, Person	Man
	Other animal	Mare	Foal, Horse	Stallion
Inanimate	Solid inanimate	House	Brick, Town	Wall
	Abstract	Actuality, Difficulty	Whole, Nothing	Ideal, Hope

Different languages divide up the gender space differently



Slide 2: Pronoun formations

Even the first person, logically the simplest to define because it invariably refers to the speaker, becomes complex in the plural. English (as do many other languages) uses a single word to represent seven possible groupings around the speaker, and therefore seven different meanings of “we” (see slide 3). Some of those meanings do not even count as first person forms in other languages.

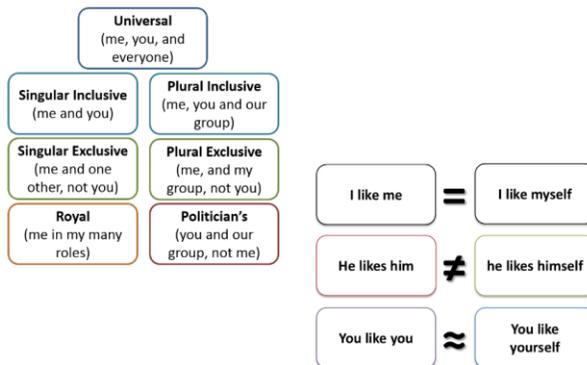
Additionally, there is the issue of social modelling. Like other primates, we are able to model the intentions and likely actions of others in our social group; and, like other apes, we seem able to model the relations between other members of our group – relations which may be very different from our own relationships with those individuals (Edwardes, 2010, 2014). From this modelling of others as intentional beings, we also seem able to model our own self as if it were a third party – perhaps because others are sharing their models of us with us.

So social modelling means that we are able to view ourselves as other than ourselves, a capacity which creates some interesting “intrapersonal” pronoun issues. For instance, when I berate myself by saying “you idiot!”, am I expressing an utterance with the same meaning as, or different meaning to, “I am an idiot!?”

Another grammatical anomaly tied to this self-modelling is reflexion. When I say “I like me”, the utterance co-identifies with “I like myself”: *I*, *me* and *myself* all represent the same person, so “I like me” is clearly reflexive. When I say “He likes him”, however, *he* and *him* represent different people; the utterance is non-reflexive and does not co-identify with “he likes himself”. If I should utter the distinctly odd form of “you like you”, then I would be committing polysemy: it can mean both “you [this person] likes you [that person]” and “you like yourself”. There can be no pronoun-general rule for reflexion because each voice works differently.

There is also some evidence that, in the first person singular, there are subtle differences of meaning between *me* and *myself* when used in reflexive constructs (Edwardes, 2003). There seems to be a statistical tendency for *I like me* (and similar forms) to be used for more intimate occasions, where there is true identity reflexion. *I like myself*, on the other hand, is used where the objective self is viewed as a different self, and there is only distant identity reflexion.

Seven we’s and reflexion



Slide 3: Seven we’s and reflexion

As Georg Höhn (2015) shows, the grammar of pronouns is inextricably tied up with their semantic relationships, and these co-vary in different languages; but what does it mean, in terms of communication as a system, to be an *I*, or a *you*, or a *they*? Unusually in language, pronouns as generic words have quite concrete meanings: *I* am the speaker, *you* are the one spoke to, and *they* are the spoken-about. However, when used specifically, pronouns become highly contextual. Indeed, the same object can be represented by *I*, *you*, and *she*, *he* or *it*, depending on viewpoint. In a dialogue, your *I* is my *you*, and my *I* is your *you*; yet we usually have no problem interpolating the correct meaning into an utterance – and we do it so automatically that we don’t even

notice the semantic oddities that pronouns produce. Yet those oddities are present: there is evidence that the interpolation between *I* and *you* is considerably more effortful for autistic people and very young children (Evans & Demuth, 2011), indicating that the semantics of pronouns is neither innate nor automatic.

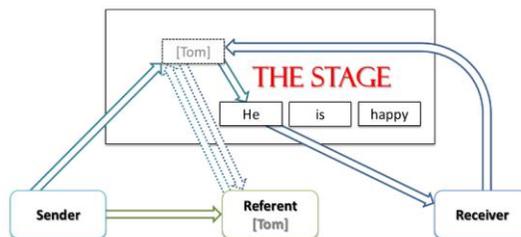
Pronouns as anaphors

Karen van Hoek (2007) offers a semantic approach to pronouns by looking at their anaphoric, or referring, nature. She develops a semantic representation, based on Langacker's (1985) Stage Model, in which pronominal reference is an "on-stage" (objectively relevant) marker of "off-stage" (subjectively apparent) things. By placing things on-stage the speaker is increasing their relevance in the discourse, and by referring to them pronominally, they are reducing the discursive distance between the thing and the sender and receiver.

She describes this as follows (Van Hoek, p894):

"The pronoun blurs the distinction between the onstage and offstage, or objective and subjective, regions, thereby portraying its referent as conceptually closer to the speaker and addressee that does a full noun phrase."

Karen van Hoek's Pronominalisation



Slide 4: Karen van Hoek's Pronominalisation

For van Hoek, pronominal referentiality is a product of several factors, among which are:

- **Prominence:** the salience of the off-stage item in the discourse, and its relevance to the receiver.
- **Connectivity:** the relationship established between the off-stage item and the on-stage pronoun.

- **Point of view:** the interplay of the different views of what is happening “on-stage” – sender’s view, receiver’s view, and the views of the parties identified within the discourse.

Pronouns work because they act as shared shortcuts between the sender and the receiver; and that sharing is limited by cognitive capacities and defined by shared culture. While pronouns are often seen by generative analyses as evidence for the existence of a syntactic engine in the brain (e.g. Chomsky, 1986, pp60-61), van Hoek emphasizes that they have a very different significance if their grammatical, syntactical and discursive natures are integrated into a single view.

Pronouns: simple or complex?

As van Hoek shows, approaching pronouns as grammatical, or semantic, or even grammatico-semantic items, does not seem to capture their full nature. Grammatically they don’t “work” coherently, and semantically they don’t “mean” coherently. So is there a way in which pronouns can work, and do mean?

Incoherent pronominalisation



Grammatically, pronouns form a regular, rule-based set



Syntactically, pronouns stand in for referenced nouns



Semantically, pronouns reference nouns in a predictable way



Lexically, pronouns are identifiable by their referentiality



Cognitively, pronouns represent the same thing coherently



Culturally, pronouns represent the voices in an utterance (Sender, Receiver, Referent)



Slide 5: Incoherent pronominalisation

If we look at pronouns as cognitive constructs, the three persons represent the three roles in a communicative act: the speaker, or sender; the listener, or receiver; and the object discussed. The first two are systemic, and their roles are unchanging – although, within a dialogue, the person adopting each role constantly changes. The third role, however, is referential: it has no meaning without some other indication of what it refers to. To understand how this works requires a view of the utterance from outside the communicative act, and this view differs considerably from the grammatico-semantic interpretation from inside the communicative act.

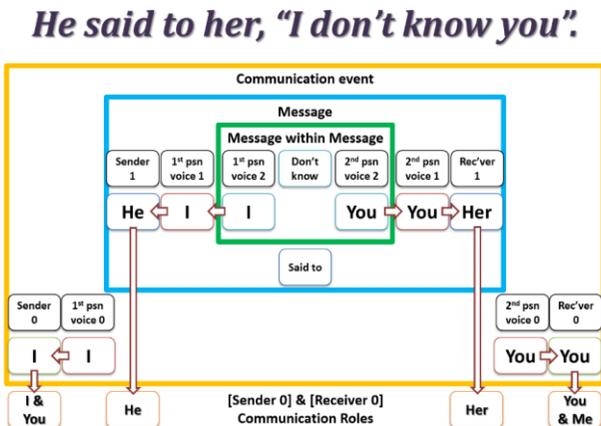
For instance, if we look at the construct **He said to her, “I don’t know you”**, the view from outside the communicative act should help us to isolate grammatical, semantic and discourse effects inside the utterance itself.

Starting with the message within the message, **I don’t know you**, we can immediately see the two pronouns, **I** and **you**; and these identify with the two voices party to this utterance, the first-person voice and the second-person voice.

However, the voices of the message within the message do not co-identify with the voices of the communication, they co-identify with the voices in the message within the communication. So the **I** of the inner message maps to the **he** of the outer message, **he said to her**, via the first person voice of the outer message; and, similarly, the **you** of the inner message maps to the **her** of the outer message, via the second person voice of the outer message.

Around these nested messages is the communication environment itself – which can be likened to The Stage in Langacker’s and van Hoek’s models. On this stage the creator of the message, the sender, has a presence as the first person voice, or **I**, and the receiver has a presence as the second person voice, or **you**. However, this **I** and **you** do not co-identify with the **I** and **you** of the inner message.

And that only leaves us with the real world to deal with. There is an actual sender and an actual receiver; and they each represent an **I** to themselves and a **you** to the other person. There are also the two terminal referents in the message, **he** and **her**; and, while they may not be actual entities, they are real in terms of the communication itself.



Slide 6: He said to her, “I don’t know you”

Interestingly, there is another effect at work here, which raises a question about referentiality. The *I* and *you* of the message within the message are resolved as references to *he* and *her*; but the references for *he* and *her* are never resolved. Does this mean that the utterance is intrinsically inexplicable? Or is there, as Hudson believes, some kind of nouny effect resolving the semantics for us? Whichever the answer, this exercise hopefully provides a sufficient answer to the second question asked in the title of this talk: pronouns, when viewed as semantic constructs within the act of communication, are pretty complex.

Pronouns: early or late?

So what of the first question in the title of this paper, early or late? The answer here depends on what you are looking for. Cognitive nominalisation probably occurred very early in the evolutionary process that produced humans; and it could be argued (e.g. Goodall, 1988) that any form of other-recognition requires the capacity to identify others as individuals. Certainly, the existence of a social hierarchy in any species seems to be based around the recognition of, and affective manipulation of, individuals (Cheney & Seyfarth, 2007). However, while we can find evidence of social manipulation in our closest species-relatives, there seems to be no sign of its communication: social modelling of others as individuals seems to have occurred long before it was expressed communicatively.

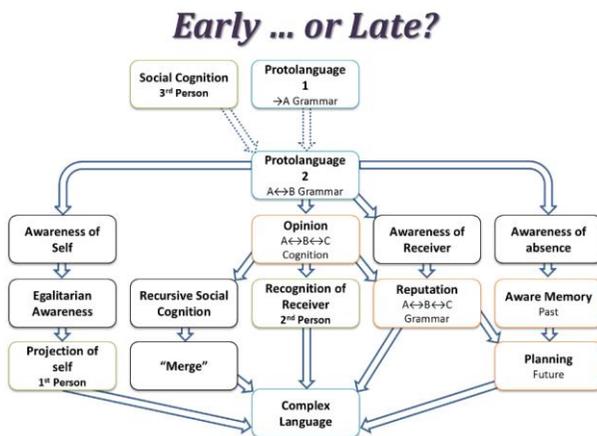
However, even when social models became communicable, there was no automatic and immediate need for pronouns: third-person nominalisation can take a communication system a long way without needing pronominalisation. In fact, pronouns only become necessary when the sender as first-person and receiver as second-person become relevant features of the communicative environment. So what features of communication would have generated the need for those persons to be expressed?

One answer, given in Edwardes (2010), is that the concepts of me-as-sender and you-as-receiver emerged from the communicative act itself. Social gossip would have involved the exchange of segmented and differentiated utterances in which individuals were labelled and the relationship between them established. However, the receiver of such models also has to be aware that they represent the opinion of the sender, because the models are subject to the bias of the sender's opinion. There is a you-as-sender which needs to be integrated with the sender-as-individual, and this you-as-sender means the receiver has to have a concept of the sender as a privileged "they".

The receiver is also going to receive a relationship model at some stage in which they are represented as one of the individuals in the relationship. To integrate this into their

social calculus, they will need a cognitive representation of themselves in the same way they have representations of other individuals – the receiver needs to model a self-as-other, giving them a concept of themselves as a privileged “they”.

By themselves, these effects are insufficient to show how pronominalisation came about: it is fully possible to use just nominalisation to power a communicative system based on the sharing of social models, although it feels distinctly odd to us. While the representation of both the sender and the receiver by the receiver as a privileged “they” is a prerequisite for first and second person pronominalisation, it does not tell us exactly how pronominalisation happened – but we know it must have happened something like the route set out in slide 7.



Slide 7: Early ... or late?

So, early or late? What is the answer to the first question posed in this paper’s title? Pronominalisation is not a primitive of languagelike communication because, at a minimum, it relies on pre-existing nominalisation, intertextual referentiality, and two-argument utterances. We must have been using languagelike communication for some time, if those raw materials were to have become commonplace in human communication before pronominalisation appeared.

However, whether this constitutes an early or late appearance depends heavily on your chosen definition of language. Bernd Heine & Kyung-An Song (2010) say that pronouns “can be traced back etymologically to or even beyond the earliest stages of reconstructible language history” (p117); but they also say that “personal pronouns are not primitives of grammatical evolution; rather, there is diachronic evidence to show that they often derive from other conceptual domains” (p143). So their approach would probably be late but not recent.

If a Minimalist approach is adopted (Hauser, Chomsky & Fitch, 2002), then whatever was being spoken before the appearance of recursion in cognition doesn't count as language; and, as pronominalisation does not require recursive cognition, it is certainly possible that it could have existed before this definition of language. That would make it not just early but a precursor in terms of language.

So whether you decide that pronominalisation is early or late in human language development depends on how you define language; and that, in turn, depends on your –ism of choice. Indeed, as this discussion has shown, a more productive question than “when?” would be “from what?”

A fuller model of the origins of grammatical language can be viewed at http://martinedwardes.webplus.net/eaorc_languageroute.html. This model is not intended to provide a definitive solution to the origins of language, but it illustrates the complexity of the process, and integrates some of the many theories into a logically consistent story.

References

- Emile Benveniste (1970 [1996]).** *The Nature of Pronouns*. In Paul Cobley (ed.), *The Communication Theory Reader*. Routledge: London, UK.
- Dorothy L Cheney & Robert M Seyfarth (2007).** *Baboon Metaphysics: the evolution of a social mind*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, Ill, USA.
- Noam Chomsky (1986).** *Knowledge of Language: its nature, origin, and use*. Praeger Publishers: Westport, CT, USA.
- William Croft (2001).** *Radical Construction Grammar: syntactic theory in typological perspective*. Oxford University Press Oxford, UK.
- Martin Edwardes (2003).** I Like Both Myself and Me. In Damien Hall, Theodore Markopoulos, Angeliki Salamoura & Sophia Skoufaki (eds.), *CamLing 2003: proceedings of the University of Cambridge First Postgraduate Conference in Language Research*. CILR: Cambridge, UK.
- Martin Edwardes (2010).** *The Origins of Grammar: an anthropological perspective*. Continuum: London, UK
- Martin Edwardes (2014).** Awareness of self and awareness of selfness: Why the capacity to self-model represents a novel level of cognition in humans. In G.

Rundblad et al (eds), *Selected Papers from the 4th UK Cognitive Linguistics Conference*. UK Cognitive Linguistics Assn: London, UK.

Karen E. Evans & Katherine Demuth (2011). Individual differences in pronoun reversal: Evidence from two longitudinal case studies. In *Journal of Child Language*, 39:1, 1-30.

Vyvyan Evans & Melanie Green (2006). *Cognitive Linguistics: an introduction*. Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, Scotland.

Jane Goodall (1988). *In the Shadow of Man (revised)*. Phoenix: London, UK.

Marc D. Hauser, Noam Chomsky & W. Tecumseh Fitch (2002). The Faculty of Language: What Is It, Who Has It, and How Did It Evolve? In *Science* 298, 1569-1579.

Bernd Heine & Tania Kuteva (2007). *The Genesis of Grammar: a reconstruction*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK.

Bernd Heine & Kyung-An Song (2010). On the genesis of personal pronouns: Some conceptual sources. In *Language and Cognition* 2:1, 117-147.

Karen van Hoek (2007). Pronominal Anaphora. In D. Geeraerts & H. Cuyckens (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK.

Georg F. K. Höhn (2015). Demonstratives and Personal Pronouns. In *Cambridge Occasional Papers in Linguistics*, 8:5, 84-105.

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1836 [1999]). *On Language: on the diversity of human language construction and its influence on the mental development of the human species*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK.

Richard Hudson (1998). *English Grammar*. Routledge: London, UK.

James Hurford (1994). *Grammar: a student's guide*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK.

Ronald W. Langacker (1985). Observations and speculations on subjectivity. In J. Haiman (ed.), *Iconicity in Syntax*. John Benjamins: Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Ronald W. Langacker (2008). *Cognitive Grammar: a basic introduction*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK.