

A Short Compendium of Me-too's and Related Phenomena: Mental Fluidity as Revealed in Everyday Conversation

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I. Canonical “me-too” examples

Sydney: I'm going to pay for my beer.

Doug [*who had had a Coke*]: Me too.

Tulle: Your whole future doesn't depend on your finishing your work tonight, does it?

Doug: No...

Tulle: Well, *mine* does!

Computer scientist: I'm in AI because it's a mixture of psychology, philosophy, linguistics, and computer science.

Architect: That's the reason I'm in architecture.

CS professor: The AI research has finally gotten off the back burner, thank god.

English professor: That's as it should be, I think — I haven't yet gotten around to doing that.

DRH, re John Searle: He probably thinks I'm *obviously* an idiot — and I guess I think the same.

Cop to bickering couple, in movie: Why don't you two learn to get along with each other? After all, *I* had to.

Eager fan of DRH, calling long distance: Dr. Hofstadter? I want you to read my paper on blah-blah-blah — it's revolutionary!

DRH: You and ten thousand other people...

Fan [*sounding quite excited*]: Oh, really?!

DRH: That is, they want me to read papers by *them*.

Fan [*suddenly sounding quite deflated*]: Oh...

Carol: I often forget my last name, still.

Peter: How often have you been married now — nine months?

Carol: Yeah.

Peter: I have that trouble every year in January.

Marilyn: My friend Sally had a terrible accident last month. She was working on the roof of their house and fell off and broke her back, paralyzing her very seriously, probably for life. Yet the first day she was in the hospital, she started playing her bassoon.

DJM: God, I don't know if *I* could do that.

Ana: This morning, I took a shower, forgetting that I'd just put all the towels into the dryer to dry, so when I got out, dripping wet, I had nothing to put around me.

Bob: Oh, I'm always making mistakes like that.

[Like *what?* Mistakes involving towels? Showers? Towels *and* showers? Of course not. Mistakes, essentially, in which you forget that you've just put something in a place where it ordinarily doesn't belong, and are nonetheless depending on it being where it usually is. This is one form of the infamous "frame problem" of AI, first consciously noticed and articulated in the 1970's, and the subject of many articles. Yet even today, there are many people in AI who aren't quite sure what the frame problem is. It's notoriously hard to convey the essence of the frame problem *explicitly* to a lot of very intelligent people, and yet, in Bob's remark, the basic idea of the frame problem was supposed to be gotten across *implicitly* by the mere phrase "like that"!]

II. Sex reversals

DJM read a newspaper article describing how a group of male teachers in Minneapolis objected to some education textbooks that used a default "she" to talk about a generic teacher. He remarked, "But women have been putting up with *that* for centuries!"

Ana: How is it with women?

Bob: Nothing much doing.

Ana: It's the same with me.

Bob: Wally's in a really awkward position — he got someone pregnant, but now he's going with someone else.

Ana: I'd hate to be in that position.

[The following is an invented variant of the preceding genuine story.]

Bob: Wally's in a really awkward position — he got someone pregnant, but now he's going with someone else.

Ana: That reminds me — my friend Andrew had a wicker-furniture store with this woman Elsie, and it went bankrupt recently. Andrew wound up getting saddled with all the debts — Elsie got off scot-free, and now she's set up a new business with someone else.

III. The US and the SU, etc.

Comedian: Only in America could you be in LA one day and New York the next.

Rabid right-wing orator: *We're* not trying to export communism — *they* are!

Radio newscaster: The major TV news show in the Soviet Union started out yesterday with a discussion of a transport development project in Leningrad. Somehow, an American news program would never start out with that kind of story.

Bob: Boy, in what other countries could you get away with *this*? [After listening to a parody of Ronald Reagan and his family on the radio.]

A bandleader, conducting patriotic songs on the evening of the 4th of July, comments: "They cannot do this in Russia." What is 'this'?

Radio news announcer: Last week, when Israeli President Shamir was here, Israel was treated as a solid friend. Now that Lebanon's President Gemayel is in town, he'll hear the same thing. [Namely, that Lebanon, too, is a solid friend.]

Samuel Pizar: 80 percent of the East Germans watch West German TV. It's the same in Poland, and vice versa.

Come again?!

IV. Double takes

DRH: I feel like I'm in a tug-of-war between Indiana and Michigan. I guess I expect that Michigan will win, but I should mention that one of my most important reasons for leaving Indiana and moving there would be *your* presence there. So, are you pretty definitely there for good?

JHH: Well, I'm not looking to move at all. I was recently approached pretty seriously by Illinois, but I wound up not leaving. So, that's a case where the *other* side won.

DRH: Or the *same* side, depending on your point of view!

Ana and Bob, who haven't seen each other in a long time, are both invited by Prez Don, president of X University, to be speakers at a festive occasion of X University. Bob lives in X Town (home of X University), but Ana lives far away. As it happens, Bob has already planned a trip to Europe during the meeting time, so he can't make it, and turns Prez Don down. Then Prez Don calls Ana, who accepts, one of her main reasons being that she would take advantage of being in Town X to spend some time with Bob again. Prez Don never mentions Bob during his call to Ana, so she isn't aware that Bob was invited to speak, nor that he'll be away during that time. Having accepted, she calls Bob up to tell him that she'll be in Town X for the festive occasion, and hopefully they can get together. Bob breaks the news to her that he too was invited to speak at the same occasion, but turned Prez Don down because he'll be in

Europe.

Ana: Oh, God, now I wish I hadn't said yes to Prez Don — seeing you was my main reason for coming to X Town!

Bob: Well, you can call him back and say no after all.

Ana: No, not really — I couldn't do that. I have no valid excuse. *You* had a legitimate reason for turning him down — namely, that you're going to be *away*. But the reason *I* don't want to speak isn't *that*. I mean, it *is* that! It's very strange!

V. Fluidity of temporal and spatial pointers

Larry: Your hair is pretty long.

Doug: I usually let it grow another month.

At 4 one Thursday afternoon, Doug is driving to a doctor's appointment, and passes by a phone booth in which he sees a woman talking on the phone. He thinks to himself, "This time last week, *I* was using that very phone." What he means is, on his way to his doctor's appointment the previous week, which happened to be at 3 on Monday, he had stopped to make a quick phone call in that booth.

One Friday, Dan Dennett says to his daughter, "The doctors say that if all goes well, Mom can come home on Monday — but they said that ten days ago, too."

Firstly, ten days ago the doctors didn't say that she could come home *this* Monday; so did Dan mean that ten days ago they said she could come home on what was *then* the upcoming Monday? No; he meant that ten days ago, they said she could come home *in three days*, which is the distance to *this* Monday as measured from *now*.

Gary Hart: It is time to move forward to the 80's and the 90's, as the Democratic party has done in its greatest periods in the past.

A billboard with sexist imagery in Ann Arbor was defaced late one night, in the wake of an anti-rape parade that evening. Gray commented, "*Last* year after last night, that same sign was trashed."

Bob, shopping for the first time in an unfamiliar grocery store: The sugar is usually somewhere around *here* [meaning, roughly, "in the vicinity of the flour"].

Newspaper columnist to a friend: My subscription copies arrive on my doorstep, along with everyone else's.

VI. Names as fluid pointers

Ana: My parents often say 'Lucie' when they mean 'Ana', and vice versa.

Bob: Oh, yeah — my parents do that, too.

Bank official: To provide for the case of death, a lot of single people just have their funds revert to the estate of Douglas R. Hofstadter.

Roy: 'Beijing' is one of the few words in Chinese that I want to pronounce 'Peking'.

VII. Strangely floating pronoun bindings

Ana, on a walk out in the hills with Bob and some other friends: Kind of makes me want to ride my bike, doesn't it?

Andrew Hodges [on page 85 of his biography of Turing]: He [G. H. Hardy] did not have Alan [Turing]'s problem, of having to create his own subject.

To whom is "his" bound? If to "Alan", then how would it have been if Hardy had been a woman? "She did not have Alan's problem, of having to create his own subject"? If to "Hardy", then how would it have been if Turing had been a woman? "He did not have Ellen's problem, of having to create her own subject"?

Cindy and George are eating lunch at a buffet in a restaurant. George wants to bypass his waitress, and simply go to the buffet table and take a piece of pie directly, even though it's not included in the price of the buffet lunch. Cindy says to George, "Go ahead — I've seen some people do it, and then just tell her afterwards."

To whom is the pronoun "her" here bound? It seems to float midway between referring to George's particular waitress and to the waitresses who were involved in previous incidents Cindy had witnessed of "doing it" (whose meaning is also unclear).

VIII. Cases where a pointer is unexpectedly rigid, rather than fluid

DRH: God, it's so damn cold here in Mother Bear's in the winter.

DJM: Yeah, and you would think, "Oh, it's not that way in the summer", but it *is* — it's around 60 degrees in the summer!

[DRH was caught off guard by this last bit, expecting that DJM's meaning was that, just as Mother Bear's is too *cold* in the winter, it is too *hot* in the summer. In other words, DRH had assumed that DJM's phrase "that way" essentially meant "uncomfortable indoors because of inadequate climate-control equipment", when all DJM had in fact meant was "damn cold".]

Highway Patrol sign: Watch your speed — we are.

Autistic boy, returning to a house he had only once visited before, one 4th of July evening several years earlier: "Where are the fireworks?"

IX. Families

Bob [idly musing about possible romantic leads for his single and lonely son Joe]:
Prez Frank told me he has a daughter in North Carolina and that she's beautiful,
too. Of course, that's what *many* fathers think, but still...

Ana: I know when my sister's birthday is.

Bob: Well, *I* don't [meaning he doesn't know when his brother's birthday is].

Ana: Her husband has to commute to work in another town three times a week.

Bob: Yeah, the same's true for my brother [meaning that his brother's wife has to
commute to another town to work].

X. Miscellany

Young girl [*taking a sip of fresh home-brewed cider*]: Ooh, that's *sour!*

Woman at table: Gee, I hope you feel that way about *caviar!*

[That it's *sour?*]

Greg: I had this friend named 'Elfenbein', and I figured out it meant 'ivory'. Then I
said to him, "Do you know what your name means?" He said no, and I told him.

Doug: That's really weird — how can somebody not know *that?*

Adelaide, comparing her old days in college with her professor son's situation: "We
didn't have to drive 120 miles to get to the train station, the way Peter does." What she
is referring to is that Peter lives 120 miles from the nearest airport.

Excerpt from a DRH fan letter: "Enclosed you will find a program for a fascinating
performance we witnessed two nights ago. Halfway through, I started thinking of
your book *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, and the playful way you introduced and developed some
very challenging concepts. The Flying Karamazov Brothers are nothing short of
fabulous in doing the same thing in a performance format."

Doing *the same thing?*

Ana: Is it raining?

Bob: It wasn't when I came in.

Ana: No, me neither.

DAB: Are we on hoof?

DRH: No — I'm on my bicycle.

DAB: Well, I'm not.

DRH to DAB: I told Dennis about your music program, and he was pretty interested.
He said to tell you to write an article about it and send it to him, and he might
publish it. I did that for David, too.

XI. Deliberately humorous quips à la me-too

DRH: The publisher is breathing down my neck quite heavily about getting this book finished — and I am, too!

Oakland Raiders football-team player: I'm so anxious to win, I'd run over my mother.
Redskins player: *I'd* run over his mother, too!

DRH: Bernie said he was missing you this weekend.

DJM: Bernie said that? I can't imagine him saying that!

DRH: Oh, I don't know...

DJM: I mean, I can't imagine him saying that to *me*.

DRH: You mean, telling you he missed *me*?

XII. Not quite in the category, but of some related interest

Doug: Have they picked up the garbage on this side of the street yet?

Unknown neighbor: Not yet.

[Silence.]

Neighbor: I'm Sandy.

Doug: I'm Doug.

[Normally, Doug would never introduce himself with the phrase "I'm Doug" — but the protocol Sandy established made him adopt her syntax, and he did it completely effortlessly and unthinkingly — only afterwards noticing it.]

Ana: When I was growing up, all I heard about was the St. Louis Cardinals football team.

Bob: You mean baseball?

Ana: Football.

Bob: I thought it was baseball.

Ana: It's both. It's the *only* city. [meaning, "the only city that has two pro teams with the same name"]

DRH: I just thought you might want to know, Leonard Schiff died this morning.

GHW: Oh, our cat died yesterday.

Headline in *Corriere della Sera* (a major Italian newspaper): "La Francia mette in vendita la sua Rai". ("France is putting its Rai up for sale", Rai being the Italian national radio and television broadcasting company.)

Whenever Carol and Doug stay at Doug's parents' house at Stanford (the house where he grew up), they stay in a larger bedroom than the one he grew up in. However, in the first year or so after they'd been married, when they would go out to visit, he would often, by force of habit, go to his old room, instead of the one they were using.

One time when this had just happened, Doug mused: “My reflex to go to my old room is like Carol’s reflex to sign her name with her maiden name.”

Ana: I often think to myself, ‘If you were a guy, would you like you?’, and I say, ‘No.’

DRH: If I were my parents, I would complain immediately and very strongly.