

SENTENTIAL AND DISCOURSAL REFLEXIVES IN ENGLISH:
A MATTER OF VARIATION

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Rules of grammar represent a body of accepted facts, descriptive in nature, about language. The rules of the grammar of the reflexive, while no exception, are clearly defined in descriptive and pedagogical grammars. What these grammars do not account for, however, are the systematic and generalized deviations from the rule. Close observation of native speakers of English, in written and oral communication, reveals that the rules governing reflexivization are undergoing change. This is not to say that the general rule no longer applies, but that there is variation in the application of the rule. The analysis and comments in this paper deal with the variation in the use of the reflexive.

Native speakers of English, as the following sentences illustrate, seem to possess a variation grammar with regard to the reflexive.

1. *I would appreciate it if you could notify Karen or myself if you will not be able to attend.*
2. *Well, Sam, they weren't athletes such as yourself.*
3. *I'd like to remind ourselves.*
4. *You're the best in the country. Let's hear it for yourself.*
5. *We do the casting ourselves.*
6. *I know that Terry, myself, and Cheryl need the books.*
7. *They pick up a lot of movies from producers like myself.*
8. *This is so atypical for myself.*

In analyzing this kind of variation which is, I repeat, almost as much written as it is oral, I propose to offer linguistic, sociolinguistic, and even psychological insights to support the variation.

The sentences which constitute the corpus of this research represent na-

tural language, that is, they were produced by native speakers in both spoken (spontaneous) and written (mostly unedited) form. As a corpus, the sentences represent only a portion of the samples of reflexive uses that have been collected over the past five years. The loci of their origin are numerous: casual conversations; spontaneous speech at meetings; television dialogues; television commercials; letters and memoranda; academic papers; novels; and the print media. No serious effort to search written or taped conversation was ever undertaken to find the data. However, a close analysis of the data demonstrates that the variation is not random and is, in fact, quite systematic. The variation is quite extensive in that it appears to occur with each form of the reflexive.

I wish to note also that the variation is not confined to any regional U.S. dialect but seems to be ubiquitous among L1 users of English. When I say L1 users of English, I mean that all L1 users of English, not just users of American English, are capable of producing the variation.

As a final note on the corpus, it would be imprudent of me not to acknowledge my debt to many of my unwitting informants, for it is their language that forms the corpus of this research. As a linguist and an observer of language, I should perhaps confess that, after five years of listening for the variation in the reflexive, I probably listened more to the form than to the content of the language of those who were colleague/informants.

A word is in order about what I will call the general Reflexive Rule in English. This rule refers to a "clause mate" condition, a "coreferentiality" condition, or an "identity" condition which specifies that the reflexive rule applies when there is a personal antecedent in the clause or sentence, and, as I will argue later, even in the discourse. The rule generally does not produce a reflexive as subject, direct object, indirect object, or object of the preposition. Lees and Klima (1963), Jackendoff (1972), Postal (1974), Leech and Svartvik (1975), Culicover (1976), and Harris (1967a, 1976b) provide clear analyses of the reflexive in English. The corpus reinforces the different linguistic analyses, yet it also provides additional data which cannot be accounted for using the evidence of the clause mate or identity condition. Sentences (1) through (8) indicate that L1 users of English do employ reflexives as subjects and objects.

In an earlier analysis of the reflexive and L1 and L2 speaker judgments about grammaticality and acceptability, I reported that the corpus reveals that

... the variation with reflexives may fall into at least four categories: (a) sentential subjects without referents; (b) sentential direct objects without referents; (c) prepositional objects without referents; and, (d) predicate nominatives. (Staczek 1985: 4)

In that paper, I attempted to show that (a) L1 speakers were more tolerant of the variation than were L2 learners, and (b) L2 learners would encounter

the variation and would at least need to recognize it as examples of L1 speaker performance. The data that follow fall into some very clear categories:

Category A: reflexive as subject

9. *There are few places in the world where an amateur like myself can participate in such a sport.*
6. *I know that Terry, myself, and Cheryl need the books.*
10. *Why should someone with less seniority than myself be considered for the position?*
11. *Enclosed please find the books Marcelle and myself collected.*

Category B: reflexive as predicate nominative

2. *Well, Sam, they weren't athletes such as yourself.*
12. *Experts such as yourself are not all easy to convince.*

Category C: object of the preposition.

7. *They pick up a lot of movies from producers like myself.*
8. *This is so atypical for myself.*
13. *It's important for my students and myself to get settled early in a course.*

Category D: direct object

1. *I would appreciate it if you notify Karen or myself if you are not to attend.*
14. *I don't see himself in the Governor's mansion.*

Category E: cross-clausal

15. *For someone such as myself who is not superstitious, I prefer not to worry about Friday the 13th.*
16. *That's my way of reminding myself what I need to do.*
17. *Between ourselves and Mark we should get started on the proposal.*

There are other matters to be dealt with in the above examples such as (a) the appearance of a reflexive form, or even an objective form after the comparative "than", rather than the grammatically indicated form; (b) the use of a simple objective form such as "me" or "you"; and, (c) the noun+conjunction+reflexive, that is, distance of the direct object or prepositional object from the verb or preposition. The variation clearly suggests a number of possibilities. There is, in addition, the question of rhythm or number of syllables that the speaker unconsciously measures. The speaker might even be adding another syllable for what he determines to be necessary to the cadence of the clause or sentence.

As more data came to the fore, it became necessary to look beyond clause and sentence grammar to discourse grammar. How is it, for example, that

a reflexive is generated in situations such as the following?

18. *I'd like to remind ourselves.*
19. *Realities are created by humanity ourselves.*
20. [paragraph 1] opens with "I..."
[paragraph 2] opens with "Besides myself, there are eight others..."
21. [sequential sentences] *I found him in the person of... He was a multilingual Franco American, a few years older than myself.*
4. *You're the best in the country; let's hear it for yourself.*

In first person narratives, there exists a **persona** at the head of the narrative and in control of it. This **persona** becomes the clause mate or identity condition for the non-systematic uses of the reflexive observed in the corpus. It seems plausible to explain the reflexive generation because of this narrative **persona**. In the case of sentence (18), it appears to be the case that there is a first person narrator who is addressing an audience in which he includes himself. Therefore, the use of 'ourselves' rather than 'us' which fails to capture the semantic relationship of the narrator in the dual roles of narrator and audience participant. If the body of data were not so overwhelming with regard to the extensiveness of the variation, the analyst, myself included, might be tempted to categorize this use as simply random.

There is another interpretation that the reflexive is used differently from the specification of its rule because of (a) a confusion over when to use reflexives and non-reflexives, i.e., with a sequence of coordinated elements, with first person plural subjects when there is a **single persona** narrating as in

22. *We're trying to check on gold medals, for O'Brien and myself.*

with first person singular subjects when the **persona** also refers to a first person plural and wishes to include 'himself'.

There is another potential category of a variable reflexive, namely, one in which 'self' is used as a free morpheme. Take, for example, the next two sentences:

23. *Let me introduce my marvelous self.*
24. *My dear friend and my selfish self...*
25. *Bring your thirsty self right here.* [Miller beer commercial]
26. *Peter is not his same old self.*
27. *Just look at your skinny little self.*

While it is grammatically unusual to break up the morpheme string of **personal pronoun** + 'self' and insert an adjective, it is easy to see how it's done and what stylistic effect it achieves. In fact, in examples (23) — (27), one could replace the 'self' with any other noun and achieve well-formedness. Does this not

suggest at least the potential for reformulating the morphology of the reflexive morpheme? What is to prevent a stylistic variation such as the following:

28. *I did it my independent self.*

or even

29. *I did it my own self.*

Of course, in (29) the matter of primary stress on **own** is somewhat unusual.

A next to final category relates to the plural reflexives of the first person. At least a couple of examples found their way into the corpus and are worth some remarks. The examples below reveal a lack of agreement in number between the subject and its reflexive:

30. Patient: *Who does the casting?*
Dental Student: *We do the casting ourselves.*
31. *We just arrived ourselves.*

It might be argued that these are simply incorrect applications of the segment of the reflexive rule that deals with agreement. On the other hand, there may be a case for an analogy with the **second person** pair of 'yourself/yourselfs'. It is only a guess, though it is a calculated one, that the second person singular reflexive appears in many contexts even when the plural form may be called for. The plural form may be undergoing displacement. Of course, its antecedent is unmarked morphologically for number but semantically marked given the context, which may explain the phenomenon. By artificial or false analogy, the first person plural subject then generates the morphologically simple form. Further hypothesizing, the frequency of **-self** as compared to **-selves** is probably much higher and thereby causes a merger and even eventual loss of the plural reflexive form. Though plausible, the explanations are still quite hypothetical.

The category of variation I do not deal with is that which includes forms such as **heself**, **hissself**, **theyself**, **youself**, and **themself**, not because they could not form part of the corpus but because they are nonstandard morphological forms that are probably best analyzed as morphological and not grammatical deviations.

Earlier in this paper, I referred to the possibility of introducing some psychological evidence for reflexive variation. I characterize it as psychological because it seems to have something to do with the speaker's perception of self and the use of the first person pronoun. Its manifestation is a sentence with 'myself' as subject as in

6. *I know that Terry, myself and Cheryl need the books.*
11. *Enclosed please find the books that Marcelle and myself collected.*

It is further a fact that this use occurs with sequential subjects and with a coordinate conjunction when the final member of the subject group is the first person. It also occurs when there is a need to express the first person as the object of the preposition, as in

8. *This is so atypical for myself.*

and with the coordinate conjunction

13. *It's important for my students and myself to get settled early in a course.*

Before I summarize, I should point out that the comparative 'than' somehow also influences the generation of a reflexive, in that the speaker must interpret 'that' as a preposition as in such common uses as

32. *John is bigger than me.*

10. *Why should someone with less seniority than myself be considered for the position?*

The same phenomenon occurs with 'like' and 'such as', as in

9. *There are few places in the world where an amateur like myself can participate in such sports.*

2. *Well, Sam, they weren't athletes such as yourself.*

12. *Experts such as yourself are not at all easy to convince.*

In summary, both at the sentential and discursal levels there is an abundance of linguistic variation to suggest that the Reflexive Rule in English is undergoing change. The spontaneity of the written and oral expression and the extensiveness of the variation lead me to believe that the Reflexive Rule continues to apply regularly but it also applies with new and interesting modifications. It is our task to describe the variation as a fact of language in the interest of advancing our knowledge about language use and the science of linguistics.

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