

THE ENGLISH PRONOMINAL REFLEXIVE:
AN ASPECT OF USAGE VARIATION

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Formal linguistic research on syntax in recent years has yielded volumes of data and analysis from among which I might have chosen to cite a particular author with regard to at least one aspect of language variation, namely, the pronominal reflexive. The work of John Simon, drama critic for *New York* magazine, author of *Paradigms Lost: Reflections on literacy and its decline*, and skilled user of the English language, serves to make an important introductory point on language variation:

Grammar is a tricky, inconsistent thing. Being the backbone of speech and writing, it should, we think, be eminently logical, make perfect sense, like the human skeleton. But, of course, the skeleton is arbitrary, too. Why twelve pairs of ribs rather than eleven or thirteen? Why thirty-two teeth? It has something to do with evolution and functionalism — but only sometimes, not always. So there are aspects of grammar that make good, logical sense, and others do not... Unfortunately, it takes only one or two intruding words for agreement — and logic — to vanish... There are, then, many instances where grammar is manifestly logical and where application of simple logic could spare us a good many errors (Simon 1980:3).

That Simon should use “decline” in his title is infortunate because its use renders a judgment about the author’s intent in discussing literacy. That is not the intent of this paper. In fact, an interpretation of Simon’s work demonstrates that implicit in his remark is the immutable fact that language changes because human beings use language. And one aspect of the English language, the pronominal reflexive, though descriptive grammars define it and show the conditions under which it occurs systematically, has undergone some remarkable asystematic changes in spoken and written varieties of modern English.

That the formal rules for pronominal reflexives in English are undergoing reformulation in spoken varieties of English, changes that are eventually reflected in writing, is the genesis of the research presented here. Analytic in its approach and descriptive in its intent, this research seeks to clarify the variations in the use of the pronominal reflexive and to advance some interpretations for the variation. The work of Lees and Klima (1969) and Jackendoff (1972), as examples of systematic linguistic research, is critical as an introduction to the study of the pronominal reflexive. In addition, the work of applied linguists such as Leech and Svartvik (1975), in their pedagogical grammar of English, is equally important to this study. We will shortly look at their insights as a preface to the study of the variations in use of the pronominal reflexive in contemporary American English.

The corpus of sentences presented here, it should be observed, represents a collection of data principally from spoken English — normal conversational English — observed in a number of contexts: peer interaction in meetings and informal exchanges. Reinforcing data were collected from televised interviews, written memoranda, newspaper reports and the literary works of a random set of contemporary authors. No attempts were made to elicit the data. In fact, an apology must be extended to my unwitting informants because I often listened to the form of their statements and conversations while nearly totally overlooking the content. In any case, I view the data to be an objective collection of a variety of asystematic uses of the pronominal reflexives.

I will attempt to show (a) that asystematic variation in modern English allows for the production of such sentences as:

- (1) What about yourself?
- (2) I'd like to ask yourself to take the lead...
- (3) It was not quite accepted by myself.
- (4) The text of this book has gone through two professional copy editors, two nonprofessional (though nonetheless paid) ones, two nonprofessional nonpaid ones, my mother and myself.

and (b) that variation may be attributed to a number of circumstances in spoken English.

From an analytic and descriptive point of view, reflexive variation falls into several categories: (a) reflexive pronouns as sentential subjects; (b) reflexive pronouns as sentential direct objects; and, (c) reflexive pronouns as prepositional objects. With these uses in mind, a word is in order for the descriptive position, particularly the descriptivist position related to the use of grammar and not to grammatical structure. Leech and Svartvik, in *A communicative grammar of English*, introduce the pronominal reflexive in the following way:

Reflexive pronouns are used as objects, complements, and (often) prepositional complements where these elements have the same reference as the subject of the clause or sentence (1975: 262).

In subsequent elaborations of the rule of usage, Leech and Svartvik refer to "...pointing back to the element which is understood... used as alternatives to *me*, *us* etc. after *as* (for), like *but* (for), *except* (for) and in coordinated noun phrases..." (1975: 262). Key here are the terms *reference* and *alternatives*. As the corpus reveals, reference does not obtain in the use of the reflexives; alternatives seem to be the case.

In their major research on English pronominalizations, Lees and Klima (1963) deal with the reflexive pronouns to "point to certain peculiarities in their use and ask how these might be accounted for by means of grammatical rules" (1963: 17). In an attempt to generalize, Lees and Klima try to conclude that

...we might suppose that when the subject and the object of a sentence are identical the object must be the corresponding *-self* form (ignoring the trivial question of which *-self* form corresponds to which subjects) ...there are many examples in which the simple pronoun form also appears in contrast with the reflexive pronoun in *-self*...and even cases in which the repeated nominal must be replaced by the simple pronoun...and we might say further that the given pronominalization rule which yields simple pronoun replacements... when the second occurrence is part of the same simplex (kernel) sentence the pronominal replacement is always reflexive; but when the two occurrences are from different component sentences, the subordinate one is replaced by the simple pronoun (1963: 18—19).

Lees and Klima also refer to restrictions on pronominalizations, for example, "...when the pronominalized noun is a repetition of an indirect object in the matrix sentence..." and the case where "...the reponominalized object may not become the subject of a passive sentence" (1963: 19—20). Although the constraints on the rules are clear, they do not account for the majority of the sentences below. In fact, they would impede their generation. Postal (1974) also deals with reflexivization and pronominals and claims that

reflexivization of a pronoun by an antecedent is not inherently restricted to pairs of NPs that are Clause Mates, but rather that the rule can operate between an antecedent and a commanded pronoun that is in a lower clause (1974: 61—62).

He goes on to make his set of arguments to support Ordinary Reflexivization as restricted to Clause Mates much the same as the case presented by Lees and Klima in their early generative work.

In another systematic but brief analysis of reflexive pronouns, Culicover (1976) points out several characteristics of the reflexive pronoun:

1. they share the characteristic ending of *-self* and *-selves*;
2. they share numerous properties with noun phrases in general;
3. their distribution is somewhat different from that of noun phrases, for example, position, except perhaps in the cases of verbs of perception with embedding; and,

4. they must refer to the same individual as some other noun in the sentence, the situation known as *coreferentiality* (1976: 144–145).

He further describes, using the rules of semantic interpretation proposed by Jackendoff (1972), the conditions of *coreferentiality*, namely,

1. that the two NPs agree in gender, number and person;
2. the location of the NP and the reflexive pronoun relative to one another in the syntactic structure (1976: 147).

Harris (1976 a) reinforces the Lees and Klima interpretation of the

...conditions of identity with an antecedent noun, identity within a simplex sentence, that is, within the same simple phrase marker, will yield reflexive forms, while identity within a complex sentence, that is across sentence boundaries, will yield non-reflexive forms (1976a: 64).

In Harris' semantic approach to nominalizations, some exceptions to the reflexive rule are noted and some generalizations to account for reflexivization with nominals are proposed. In a second iteration on reflexivization (1976 b), Harris revisits the principle

...that reflexivization operates only within a simple sentence while pronominalization ranges over complex sentences...it has had to be reexamined in the light of attempts to define its operation within the theory of the cycle...Cyclical application would permit reflexivization to range over "complex strings when sentence boundaries are erased and would therefore produce ungrammatical forms...On the other hand, there are certain occurrences of reflexive forms that are so far unexplainable under this assumption (1976b: 73).

In an earlier version of this paper (Staczek 1982), I analyzed a corpus of forty sentences from a descriptive point of view, attempting to demonstrate that variation with pronominal reflexives in English fell into three categories: (a) sentential subjects; (b) sentential direct objects; and, (c) prepositional objects.

The subject or predicate-nominative use of the reflexive reveals the following variations:

- (5) Mr. Dennison, Mr. Panas and *myself* have spent literally hundreds of hours...
- (6) I suggest that she and I, as well as Mr. Asid, Mr. San and *yourself* plan a session together.
- (7) If they are there, as well as Rick and *myself*...

Item (5) shows the coordination described by Leech and Svartvik. Items (6) and (7), however, extend beyond what might be called normal coordination to a modified coordination with *as well as*.

In item (8), the simple reflexive pronoun is used as the subject in response to a question, a rather generalized conversational occurrence:

- (8) Who did it for manager? Himself?

A possible interpretation is that (8) results from a deletion that may, in the deep structure, be something like sentence (9):

- (9) The manager *himself* did it.
(or)
The manager did it *himself*.

Conversational style appears to admit other coordinators such as *as far as* and *including* as in items (10) and (11):

- (10) As far as *myself* is concerned...
- (11) Norman thinks that we are all overpaid, including *himself*.

The coordinators in (10) and (11), as well as other coordinators, may have the effect in the mind of the speaker of requiring a prepositional form of the personal pronoun. Testing that hypothesis, we arrive at sentences such as (12) and (13):

- (12) *As far as me is concerned...
* her
* us
- (13) Norman thinks that we are all overpaid
including him *(himself).
me *(myself).
you *(yourself).

The test does not work in (12), yet in (13) it reveals more about the message than it does about the grammar. Depending on the point the speaker wishes to make, he may include others than himself. In either case, the object pronoun or reflexive pronoun is used.

In sentence (14), produced by a speaker of British English, there is a common alternation:

- (14) Nobody loved it more heartily than *herself*.

Conversational American English normally requires the object pronoun rather than the reflexive pronoun in such cases of comparison; formal, written English requires a subject pronoun.

At the level of sentence embedding, the expected object pronoun is replaced by the reflexive pronoun as shown in sentence (15):

- (15) He doesn't want anyone but *himself* to do it.

While it may be argued that across sentence boundaries, and especially with an embedding, if the rule of reference obtains, then the reflexive pronoun may be used. To do otherwise introduces ambiguity in the sentence. To avoid this ambiguity, however, the speaker may add stress to the subject of the

embedded clause as in (16):

- (16) He doesn't want anyone but *him* to do it.
 her
 us

A final observed use of the reflexive pronoun as subject is that of predicate nominative in item (17):

- (17) Little did he know that one danger was *himself*.

Although there is an embedding with the referent in the matrix sentence, the subject of the embedding is different. Moreover, a stylistic variation of (17) may be evidence enough that a deletion occurred after subject selection was made, that is, sentence (18) may, in fact, be an underlying structure for item (17):

- (18) Little did he know that *he himself* was one danger.

There also exists the possibility that the structure is not the reason for the choice in (17) and that, in a number of the cases already cited, there is reason to suspect what I will call "syntactic cornering," that is, the speaker backs himself into a syntactic corner, forsaking the formal rules of grammar.

The second use of the reflexive pronoun pointed out earlier is that of direct object. There are three observed cases of this use in items (19) through (21):

- (19) I'll meet *yourself* later.
 (20) ...that allows somebody to perceive *themselves*
 themselves
 himself

In (19) and (21) there is no structural cue that would require the reflexive pronoun. The specific referent rule does not apply. In item (20), however, the indefinite *somebody* produces, on the application of the referent rule, the reflexive pronoun. *Themselves* suggests plural when the subject referent rule does not warrant it. This occurs widely as part of another rule in standard spoken English. *Himself* suggests a +masculine subject referent yet the subject itself is unmarked for gender. *Himself* is clearly a contradiction, namely, of a plural pronoun stem and the singular bound morpheme *-self*. Though its use is attested to in several non-standard varieties of English, it is a structural contradiction.

A final example of the direct object use of the reflexive pronoun is probably the most interesting of the lot. In item (22) the speaker has converted the bound morpheme *-self* to a free morpheme which now occurs as a noun:

- (22) Allow me to introduce *my* remarkable *self*.

Further analysis shows that this combination is possible with other reflexive pronouns in which the first morpheme exhibits an isomorphism with the pronominal adjective: *your X self*, *her Y self*, *our Z selves*. Other varieties of American English might also allow *his X self* and *their Y self/selves*. The circumstances under which (22) was observed was a street magic show in which the magician used language to draw and hold the attention of a mobile audience.

In the prepositional construction with a reflexive pronoun, there are at least two subcategories: (a) preposition+reflexive pronoun; and, (2) preposition+N (conjunction)+N. N in the second subcategory may be further described as either noun, pronoun or reflexive pronoun.

The first category of *preposition+reflexive pronoun* contains examples such as:

- (23) ...reviewed by *ourselves*.
 (24) Driving cars was a way of drawing attention to *myself*.

In the case of (23), "ourselves" has no first person plural referent as subject. In the case of (24), there is a deleted referent in the embedded clause as exhibited in (25) or (26)

- (25) Driving cars was a way for me to draw attention to *myself*.
 (26) Driving cars was a way I drew attention to *myself*.

At the surface level of (24), however, one might consider the use of the reflexive pronoun object as analogous to the situation in (23). In item (27), a similar set of syntactic circumstances obtains:

- (27) The safeguard among *ourselves* is...

if we drive (27) from a sentence such as (28):

- (28) The safeguard we have among *ourselves* is...

It would also seem that the surface deletion of *we have* in (28) might also produce (29)

- (29) The safeguard among us is...

in which the referent rule guides the choice. While in (27) there is no choice, in (29) there is, in fact, the justification for each being logical and systematic.

With regard to the remaining items in the first subcategory, the rule described earlier by Leech and Svartvik obtains, namely, that certain prepositions allow for alternation, as in the following sentences:

- (30) As for me/*myself*...
 (31) On the part of people like me/*myself*...
 (32) It would go there for filing and eventual feedback for *yourselves*.

In a final case of the *preposition + reflexive pronoun*, there appears to be a case for referential ambiguity in the production of item (33):

- (33) Love allegedly forged Childer's signature to a check made out to *himself* for \$520.

A logical argument can be made for two separate deletions: either the deletion of coreferential subject of "made", namely, "Love" or the deletion of a non-coreferential subject of "made". In the second deletion, there is no structural reason for the use of the reflexive pronoun. A third similar case could be made for a deletion of a copula in a passive voice construction. Sentence (33) then would have the following set of possible underlying forms:

- (34) Love allegedly forged Childer's signature to a check he made out to *himself* for \$520.
 (35) Love allegedly forged Childer's signature to a check SUBJECT made out to *himself* for \$520.
 (36) Love allegedly forged Childer's signature to a check that was made out to *himself* for \$520.

Item (36) is to be viewed as derived possibly from (35).

The second subcategory of *preposition + reflexive pronoun* is that of preposition followed by coordinated elements, either of which may be a noun, pronoun, reflexive pronoun or any combination thereof, as in the following set:

- (37) Attached is a report of the joint comprehensive planning effort of Dr. Early and *myself*.
 (38) A meeting with the deans, plus Carmen and *myself*...
 (39) The possibility of Dr. Hook and *myself* going to London...
 (40) This item is probably of interest for both Toni and *yourself*.
 (41) In conversations between him and *myself*, I emphasized the need for...
 (42) ...reviewed by me and *yourselves*.
 (43) For both Tom and *yourself*, it would be useful.
 (44) On behalf of *myself* and Delta Airlines...
 (45) Sue set up a meeting with her and *myself*.
 (46) They asked *myself* and two others.

An analysis of item (41) shows a choice of the reflexive pronoun that is more than likely based on the use of the first person subject. By analogy, then, item (45) might have an underlying representation equivalent to (47):

- (47) Sue set up a meeting with *herself* and me/*myself*.

If (47) is observed, the rule might indeed be systematic in the mind of the speaker. There is, however, a further interpretation, namely, that the reflexive pronoun is redundant to the structures of (41) and (47) and that the matrix

sentences are (48) and (49):

- (48) In conversations with him, I emphasized the need for...
 (49) Sue set up a meeting with me.

Item (41) is somewhat analogous to the locative flips once (1971) described by Lakoff in which there is a surface redundancy as in (50a-c):

- (50a) The piano has a bouquet of flowers on it.
 (50b) There is a bouquet of flowers on the piano.
 (50c) A bouquet of flowers is on the piano.

Item (50) also seems to fit the variable rule. Moreover, it might be argued that the plural subject conditions the selection of a reflexive pronoun in a prepositional construction with a set of coordinated nominal elements.

As a complement to the above analysis, I decided to design a questionnaire to survey attitudes regarding acceptability (spoken and written) and grammaticality (spoken and written) among speakers of English with regard to the use of pronominal reflexives. In its only existing form, the survey instrument was developed (a) to establish an inventory of possible variables by which to measure attitude and (b) to compare the range of variables against each other. The questionnaire was pilot-tested to serve two purposes: (a) to test the instrument itself and (b) to find out how English speakers felt about certain oral and written uses of the pronominal reflexive. The amount of data gathered from 26 respondents was enormous and, therefore, not as useful as I would have predicted. There is, I have concluded, a need to simplify and refine the questionnaire. When that is accomplished and the interpretations reported, I expect to have supporting statistical evidence to substantiate the following conclusions: (1) that there is an asystematic usage of the pronominal reflexives in English; (2) that the asystematic usage is not yet accounted for in the grammars; (3) that a questionnaire will assist in providing information on usage; and, (4) that the surface of language variation and range of acceptability with regard to at least one aspect of grammar has barely been scratched. And, while grammatical description and speaker attitudes about language are two different topics, there is nevertheless a relationship between the two that requires further analysis before linguists and language users can fully come to understand the intricacies of language variation.

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