

On the agreement of reflexive forms in English¹

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Reflexive forms in English, such as *myself* or *themselves* in (1a) and (1b), respectively:

- (1) a. I hit myself.
b. They hit themselves.

are shaped by two agreement processes. One determines the number of the lexical head of the reflexive pronoun, i.e. *-self* versus *-selves* — the other determines the form of the bound possessive person-index, e.g. *my-*, *your-*, *him-*, *her-*, etc. Thus any deviation from the forms in (1) along either of these two parameters produces ungrammatical strings:

- (2) a. *I hit myselfs/yourself, etc.
b. *They hit themselves/yourselfs/themself, etc.

Most traditional accounts of English reflexives, e.g. Quirk, *et al.* (1972: section 4.113; Table 4.5) and Leech and Svartvik (1975: sections 391, 683) treat these two processes as identical in nature, i.e. both determined by the syntactic properties of the NP which serves as the antecedent to the reflexive (*I* in (1a), *they* in (1b)). Similarly, in Helke's (1971) interpretive account of reflexives, reflexive forms are generated underlying as a lexical head *-self/ -selves* to which is prefixed in the course of the derivation a possessive form agreeing with an appropriate antecedent (in a manner analogous to the agreement of restricted possessives in phrases such as *crane one's neck*) — the number of the head, singular versus plural, in this account, is determined by the number of this 'appropriate antecedent'. Thus the major accounts² of reflexives in English concur in treating these two aspects of reflexive agreement as being parallel phenomena.

However, there are some facts in English which cast doubt on the claim that these two processes are really of the same nature. In order to get at the relevant facts, though, it is necessary to establish the framework into which they fit.

It is a common linguistic phenomenon for two or more NPs to have the same real-world referent. For example, at the present moment, the NPs *Jimmy Carter* and *the president of the United States* both refer to the same

person. Often, though, two such NPs can stand in a more systematic relationship to one another regarding their usage. For example, NPs such as *Your Majesty* or *Your Highness* are generally used in English for second person reference with respect to a royal personage, as in:

(3) Your Majesty is upset, it seems.

meaning:

(4) You, the King, are upset, it seems.

Let us call an NP such as *Your Majesty* a 'replacement NP', defined as follows:

(5) If NP₁ has the same referent as NP₂ and regularly is used in place of NP₂, then NP₁ is a *replacement NP* for NP₂.

From the above example, it is clear that replacement NPs control certain syntactic phenomena in the sentences in which they occur. For example, sentence (3) shows that verb agreement is governed by the replacement NP, for the verb form is the third person singular *is* — a second person verb form results in an ungrammatical sentence:

(6) *Your Majesty are upset, it seems.

Thus, as far as verb agreement is concerned, the syntactic features of the replacement NP are crucial and not the referent of this NP.³ This suggests that the behavior of certain apparently syntactic processes with respect to replacement NPs may provide a way of determining the true nature, syntactic or otherwise, of a particular linguistic phenomenon. In particular, the behavior of reflexives in one English construction involving a replacement NP shows that the two aspects of reflexive agreement are fundamentally different in nature.

This construction, or better, conventionalized usage, is what might be called the 'nursely *we*', and involves the use by a nurse, or a person in a similar function or role, of the first person plural pronoun *we* as a replacement NP for a second person referent, e.g.:

(7) How are *we* feeling today?

meaning:

(8) How are you, the patient, feeling today?

In this sentence-type, the range of possible reflexive forms is shown by the following:

(9) We seem a bit displeased with $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{ourselves} \\ *ourselves \\ *yourself \\ *yourselves \\ *myself \\ *myselfs \end{array} \right\}$, don't we?

meaning:

(10) You, the patient, seem a bit displeased with yourself, don't you?

Especially noteworthy is the fact that the bound possessive part of the reflexive form must be the first person plural *our-*, whereas the number of the reflexive head, *-self*, must be singular. The agreement of the possessive is therefore with the SYNTACTIC form of the replacement NP, i.e. first person plural, but the number of the morpheme *-self* is determined by the number of the REFERENT of the replacement NP, in this case singular. Note that only the plural *ourselves* would be grammatical in a sentence like (9) if the nurse were addressing two or more patients.

The conclusion to be drawn from these facts is that the selection of the possessive part of reflexives is a purely syntactically-controlled process, whereas the selection of singular versus plural reflexive-head (*-self/-selves*) is a semantically-controlled process determined by the number of the referent of the antecedent NP. It is the behavior of the reflexive with respect to a replacement NP such as that found in 'nursely *we*' sentences which clearly reveals the difference in these two aspects of the syntax of the reflexive form in English.⁴

The notion of replacement NPs would appear to have relevance to a variety of linguistic phenomena. Politeness formulae or deferential usages, as suggested by (3), may be analyzable in terms of the syntactic replacement of one NP by another, with no change of real-world referent. For example, the German use of the formally third-person plural pronoun *Sie* for second-person plural reference, or the Spanish use of *Usted(es)* for second-person reference, may be profitably viewed as being essentially reflexes of this replacement NP phenomenon.

Further research will no doubt make explicit the nature of the relationship between the notion of replacement NPs and other phenomena conducive to such an analysis. For the moment, though, the fact that this notion is crucial to the determination of the real nature of the reflexive agreement processes in English is sufficient to establish its potential utility and point the way for further work.

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Notes

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2. The major transformational account, Lees and Klima (1963), has nothing to say regarding the agreement of reflexives, leaving these processes to the morphophonemic rules.
3. There are instances in some styles of British English of apparently singular nouns, e.g. *the Government*, controlling plural verb agreement:
 - (i) *The Government are looking for ways to save the pound.*
Whereas these might be construed as examples of semantically-controlled verb agreement, since the government comprises a whole made up of many parts, other analyses seem equally likely. In particular, in view of the dialect variation in this usage (sentence (i) is ungrammatical in American and Canadian English) and in which nouns fall into this class (*police* governs plural agreement in American English but *government* does not), it seems that idiosyncratic lexical marking of certain nouns as plural is perhaps the best way to account for this phenomenon synchronically. Or, it may be akin to what Lech and Svartvik (1975: section 540) call 'grammatical' concord as in (ii) versus 'notional' concord as in (iii):
 - (ii) *I've ordered the shrubs, but none (of them) has arrived.*
 - (iii) *I've ordered the shrubs, but none (of them) have arrived.*
4. Curme (1931: 100) notes that 'after the plural of majesty *we* and editorial *we*, it is now customary to employ *ourself* as the usual reflexive with reference to a single person in contradistinction to *ourselves* with reference to more than one. The use of *ourself* in these contexts is analogous to its use in sentences with the 'nursely *we*', e.g. (7) above. The 'plural of majesty *we*' and the 'editorial *we*' are both replacement NP constructions, both involving the systematic substitution of one NP for another with a change of syntactic properties (note verb agreement is governed by the *we* and not the 'I' referent) but no change of real world referent. Curme, however, does not deal with the potential theoretical significance of this fact regarding either reflexive agreement or replacement NPs in general.
It should be noted in passing that the use of *our self*, *your self*, and *them self* as legitimate plural forms in early Modern English (see Curme, 1935: 10) does not seem to be related to the use of a form like *ourself* in replacement NP sentences. Plural reflexives like *our self*, with singular *self* as a free word, were used with antecedents that were plural in real-world reference, e.g. *The boys hurt them self*; thus this use of *self* appears simply to have been a fact of the morphology of the reflexive forms at that stage and not a reflection of a deeper fact about the nature of agreement patterns with the reflexive.

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