

What's in a (English) Reflexive?

Reflexive, Nominal Syntax, Morphology, Case

Introduction: The structure of reflexives is typically investigated by examining their external distribution, i.e., their interaction with properties of the clause and with properties of binders (Reuland 2017 and references therein). We investigate the structure of reflexives from the *inside*, using novel observations about adnominal modifiers and case-marking on the pronominal “possessor”, to uncover which structural pieces determine the form and meaning of *self*-phrases in English. Perhaps (un)surprisingly, this internal nominal structure closely parallels the internal structure of reflexive clauses.

Observation (i)–case of the “possessor”: It is well-known that English reflexives are not morphologically uniform, as shown in (1). (We tentatively group *herself* with the other 3rd person pronouns.)

- (1) a. 1st/2nd person, GEN possessor + *-self*: *myself, ourselves, yourself, yourselves*
 b. 3rd person, ACC possessor + *-self*: *himself, herself, themselves*

Less well-known is the fact that certain adnominal modifiers can intervene inside of a reflexive and that this intervention bleeds the pronominal case distinction in (1); notice that all persons (including the 3rd person, in bold red) uniformly employ genitive possessors in (2).

- (2) a. my/your/**his/her** damn/goddamn/own self (cf. *him damn/goddamn/own self)
 b. our/your/**their** damn/goddamn/own selves (cf. *them damn/goddamn/own selves)

However, it is not simply linear adjacency between the possessor and *self* that is responsible for the exceptional 3rd person accusative forms, as accusative possessors are not possible with non-reflexive *self* (i.e. when *self* is not a reflexive anaphor), as in (3).

- (3) {His/*him} self was fully realized.

Observation (ii)–adnominal modifiers: A second window into reflexive structure is afforded to us by the observation that only certain modifiers that intervene in a *self*-phrase are compatible with reflexivity. In particular, we observe first that modifiers reflecting expressive content permit a reflexive interpretation, while stage-level adjectives do not, (4)–(6).

- (4) *object of an inherent reflexive verb: only a reflexive is allowed*
 a. Behave your damn/goddamn/own self. (nb. “own” requires contrastive focus here)
 b. *Behave your young/hungry/current self.
- (5) *emphatic reflexive position: only a reflexive is allowed (nb. this is not a logophor; Ahn 2010)*
 a. I assembled the IKEA table my damn/goddamn/own self.
 b. *I assembled the IKEA table my young/hungry/current self.
- (6) *matrix subject position: only a non-reflexive is allowed*
 a. *{My/Joey’s} damn/goddamn/own self loves Barney.
 b. My/Joey’s young/hungry/current self loves Barney.

Second, there is also a contrast between stage-level adjectives and individual-level adjectives, (7).

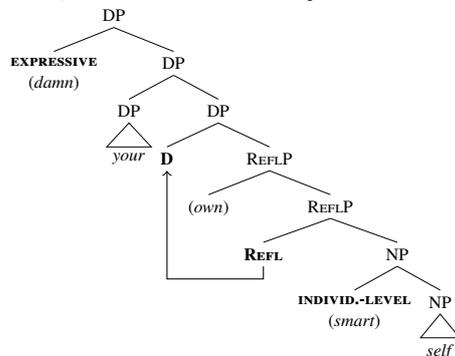
- (7) a. [To Barney the purple dinosaur]
 Behave your purple self. individual-level: ✓REFL
 b. [To Barney while he is covered in blue paint]
 *Behave your blue self. stage-level: *REFL
 c. While he was blue, Barney assembled the IKEA table his {purple/*blue} self.

Puzzle: Why is it that only the structurally highest (expressive) and lowest (individual-level) modifiers permit a reflexive distribution/interpretation, while intermediate (stage-level) modifiers prohibit this?

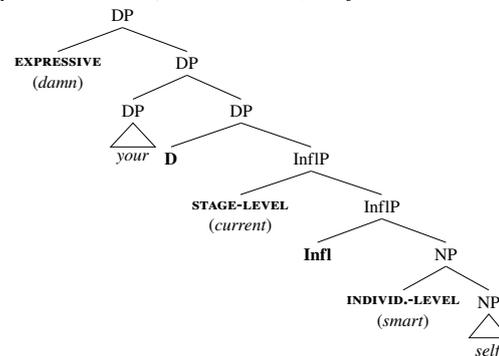
Analysis: (2)–(3) reveal that *-self* and *reflexivity* are crucially separate from each other, and suggest that

whatever conditions the accusativity of 3rd person pronouns, (1), is related to structural adjacency with whatever morphemes/structural pieces are responsible for reflexive semantics. (4)–(7) tell us that there is something about stage-level adjectives that interferes with a reflexive interpretation. To make sense of these observations, we propose the structures in (8)–(9).

(8) *your (own damn) smart self* (reflexive)



(9) *your current (damn smart) self* (non-reflexive)



Following Déchaine and Wiltschko (2017), we take D to be crucially implicated in reflexivity in English. However, we depart from this account in positing a separate REFL head on the nominal spine of reflexives; reflexive interpretation/distribution depends on REFL raising to D. Stage-level adjectives require an additional, temporally-anchored intermediate projection, InfIP, which blocks REFL from raising to D (due to Travis' (1984) HMC), thereby also blocking a reflexive interpretation. Individual-level adjectives occupy a lower position (see, e.g., Larson and Takahashi 2007), below REFLP, and so are irrelevant to the calculation of reflexivity. Expressive modifiers, too, are irrelevant to reflexivity as they are merged outside of the DP (Pfaff 2015); note that they must somehow be pronounced lower (Potts 2007).

While D-REFL adjacency is required for reflexivity, there is a more stringent condition on triggering the exceptional accusative third person: the possessor must be structurally adjacent to the D-REFL-N complex/span. When any one of these ingredients is removed or adjacency is lost between them, the 3rd person possessor's surface form reflects its underlying GEN case. (We implement this formally via a post-syntactic impoverishment rule, details of which require deeper discussion than we have room for here.)

Predictions: English reflexive pronouns are morphosyntactically complex (*pace* Rooryck and Vanden Wyngaerd 2011, §2.5.1, Safir 2004, §6.2.3), allowing for certain kinds of modification while remaining reflexive expressions. In fact, the analysis in (8) correctly predicts complex reflexive expressions as in the underlined emphatic reflexive *You can assemble it your own damn smart self*. The structurally-defined impoverishment rule also correctly predicts that the pronominal possessor for 3.M.SG is *his* in disjunctions like: *Everyone behaved [his or herself]*.

Consequences: This analysis finds support in the typological patterns of reflexive pronouns. Under this analysis, the internal structure of English reflexive pronouns closely resembles the crosslinguistically common pattern of a genitive pronominal possessor + body-part noun (cf. Déchaine and Wiltschko 2017), and suggests a new analytic possibility for the internal structure of reflexive pronouns (i.e. a distinct REFLP). At the level of microvariation, our analysis straightforwardly accounts for the fact that certain English dialects employ *hissself* and *theirselves* for 3rd person (cf. Storoshenko 2013); these dialects have structurally identical reflexives, but simply lack the impoverishment rule mentioned above.

Finally, the reflexive nominal structure in (8) in many ways parallels the reflexive *clausal* structure proposed in recent work. In works like Labelle 2008, Reuland 2011, and Ahn 2015, reflexivity is linked to a VoiceP, which occurs on the clausal spine between Infl and V. In (9), we have posited a REFLP occurring on the nominal spine between Infl and N. These parallels are striking, especially given the very similar content hosted in D/C, Refl/Voice, and N/V. In this light, we can compare the temporally-linked stage-level adnominals to English negation (*not*), which also sits in the middlefield and acts as an intervener for the T-V relationship in English.