

A Story of the American -self: a case study in morphological variation.

It is a little-acknowledged fact that speakers of American English show inter- and intraspeaker variation in the form of the reflexive pronoun associated with the lexeme *THEY*. Newman (1997) and Lagunoff (1997) have shown that *THEY* may be used to refer to singular genderless antecedents (“singular *THEY*”) in addition to its function as a plural pronoun; *THEY* formally has the paradigm of a plural pronoun, but is licensed with both plural and singular antecedents (ex.s 1 and 2 respectively). They also note (along with Joseph 1997) that some speakers have an additional form, *themselves*, as *THEY*’s reflexive for use with singular antecedents (ex. 3). However, a thorough corpus study reveals that the full story is much more complex. Two reflexive forms, *themselves* and *themselves*, appear as *THEY*’s reflexive and they both may potentially refer to singular or plural antecedents, depending on the speaker (see ex.s 4 - 8). This corpus study also unearthed a possibly related fact: there are speakers showing *ourselves* and *ourselves* in variation as well with 1pl antecedents (see ex.s 9 and 10). Building on these observations, I designed a study that went beyond the earlier accounts of singular *THEY* to first, determine the range of possible speaker-inventories which actually exist in American English for these reflexives and second, investigate any constraints that hold over which form-function(*self/selves*-singular/plural) pairings which may co-occur in a single speaker-inventory.

Aside from speakers who do not have either *themselves* or *ourselves* at all, the experimental portion of the study showed that out of 16 possible speaker-inventories for the above form-function pairings, only 9 different inventories were actually attested in the subject population. Thus, although the scope of the variation is surprisingly wide, it is not without bound. In their variety, the inventories show two effects: a) morphological doublets: multiple forms for the same function (number), and b) a splitting of functions, with forms restricted to either singular or plural. The result in a) is the more unexpected, as it challenges a principle of synchronic morphological theory: the Blocking Effect, stated in Kroch (1994) as a “no doublets prohibition.” The restrictiveness of the field of inventories, on the other hand, does in fact show co-occurrence dependencies among the inventory items: some form-function pairings may only occur in an inventory alongside other form-function pairings. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate, these co-occurrence constraints provide clues as to the diachronic story underlying the observed state of variation.

Additionally, this study gained these results using novel experimental methodology. Searches for instances of *themselves* and *ourselves* on the World Wide Web identified an initial pool of subjects whose inventories were of interest. I then sent questionnaires to those speakers that were designed to investigate their individual grammars further. In this way, the questionnaire-based part of the study was targeted to speakers who had already shown themselves to be participants in the interspeaker variation. To my knowledge, the use of an entirely email-based questionnaire targeted to a specific population of speakers by an earlier text search is unique to this study.

This study demonstrates the usefulness of targeted email questionnaires as a method for assessing morphological variation, documents new reflexive forms not widely acknowledged in the literature on American English reflexives, and provides a case study which suggests that small, subtle situations of morphological variation may bear on larger theoretical concerns.

- 1) All singers know how to act, don't they? (constructed)
- 2) Everybody could sing if they were taught. (Newman 1997: 44, citing Sklar 1988: 417)
- 3) If a person feels good about themselves, they'll look good. (Lagunoff 1997: 34)
- 4) The students asserted themselves in class. (constructed)
- 5) Fees would be lowered for travelling with someone who had either taken some form of mountaineering course (such as a NOLcourse) or who had themselves taken repeated trips with experienced guides and demonstrated a safe climbing record. (evanday.blogspot.com)
- 6) If a deaf person identifies themselves as "deaf" and wants to be a member of the DC then they will be a member. (Lagunoff 1997: 187)
- 7) The question of the awards themselves raised a few more questions. (http://keeptrying.blogspot.com/2001_12_01_keeptrying_archive.html)
- 8) The volunteers are from GE Industrial Systems and call themselves GE Elfunts. (Lexis-Nexis©: The Hartford Courant, March 24, 2000, Pg. B3)
- 9) ...we just have to do what's best for ourselves, don't you think? (<http://ourhidingplace.com/archives/000584.php>)
- 10) In preparation for some XSL work, we're now running the same Perl script that he runs, and keeping the data ourselves. (<http://perceive.net/pages/page/articles/year/2002/month/08>)

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