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

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1. Introduction[1] and Methods

The main goals of this study fall into three general categories: philological, methodological, and theoretical.

The philological aspect merely consists in demonstrating that the forms[2] *themself* and *ourself* exist for some set of functions in current American English and to document some of those functions. 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 ("epicene" 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 as in the following sentences, respectively:

(1) All actors know how to sing, don't they? (constructed)

(2) Everybody could sing if they were taught. (Newman 1997: 44, citing Sklar 1988: 417)

They also note (along with Joseph 1997 and *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* 1989: 898)[3] that some speakers have an additional form, *themself*, as THEY's reflexive for use with singular antecedents:

(3) If a person feels good about themself, they'll look good. (Lagunoff 1997: 34)

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[1] Heartfelt thanks go to Arnold Zwicky for serving as my primary advisor on this project and for being available for extensive consultation at throughout. I also had the benefit of many helpful discussions with Ivan A. Sag, Elizabeth Traugott, Tony Kroch, Rachel Lagunoff, Joan Bresnan, John Singler, and numerous graduate students at Stanford University and the University of Pennsylvania.

[2] I will be using "form" to refer only to the phonological/orthographic content of a linguistic object, contrasted with the object's "function," its place in the syntax and/or semantics of a language.

[3] Garner (1998: 594) also notes the use of *themself* though in a very different type of example: as a non-sexist reflexive in Canadian legislation. Somewhat incorrectly, the OED (1989: 892) states that *themself* "disappeared *c* 1570, though the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* makes a less categorical statement, saying that it is "earlier & now rare" (1993: 3272, **themselves**).

This assertion was born out in my own study of text from the World Wide Web; two examples follow:

(4) ...one should pay attention to their interactions with everyone, because it tells one a little more about themself. (http://nowayout.blogspot.com/2002_10_01_nowayout_archive.html#83005361)

(5) I cannot fathom the reasoning involved with allowing someone entrusted with keeping lawbreakers incarcerated to break the laws themself. (http://www.horologium.net/)

However, a thorough study of naturally-occurring data reveals that the full story is much more complex. Two reflexive forms, *themself* and *themselves*, appear as THEY's reflexive and they both may potentially refer to singular or plural antecedents, depending on the speaker, as shown in examples (6)-(8) below.

(6) The volunteers are from GE Industrial Systems and call themself GE Elfuns.[4]

(7) The tracks speak for themself. (http://sitting_duck.blogspot.com/)

(8) The question of the awards themself raised a few more questions. Many of the questions revolved around methodology, but there were some interesting thoughts on Medley's blog and metafilter on the value of awards themselves and whether they are a good means of praise or a means of exclusion. (http://keeptrying.blogspot.com/2001_12_01_keeptrying_archive.html)

This corpus-based part of the study also unearthed a possibly related fact: there are speakers showing *ourself* and *ourselves* in variation as well, with 1pl antecedents, as (11)-(12) demonstrate:

(9) …we just have to do what`s best for ourself, don`t you think? (http://ourhidingplace.com/archives/000584.php)

(10) I wonder what would happen if we all stopped limiting ourself, and started looking for our own unicorns. Maybe we'll never find them. But maybe we'll discover things about life and about ourselves along the way. (http://starlit.lunardreams.net/archive/2000_06_18_archive.php)

I will refer to the reflexives in (3)-(5) as having "Individual" function and to the ones in (6)-(10) as having "Numerous" function[5].

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[4] March 24, 2000. "Volunteers to paint St. Philip's House," *The Hartford Courant*, p. B3. from Lexis-Nexis®.

[5] I am using "Individual **"** rather than "singular," in order to avoid the question of at this point of whether *themself* and *themselves* are actually grammatically singular in

These data begin to answer the purely philological goal of this paper. More specifically, this is the first time (to my knowledge) that it has been established in print that *themself* may be used by modern American English speakers with plural reference at all, or that *ourself* may occur with a plural interpretation in the same contexts as *ourselves*. As a side point, the form *ourself* also is mentioned in a few works on current usage, but only with respect to a specialized Individual function it assumes in a small number of cases; I will call these cases "Context-Motivated Individual" (CMI) *ourself* (see Joseph 1979: 520 with regard to royal *ourself*, the reflexive counterpart to the "royal *we*" pronoun, *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1976: 881) and Garner (1998: 474) with regard to authorial *we*, and Bill Labov, p.c., and Richard Kayne, p.c., have both suggested possible contexts for CMI-*ourself*). However, the primary focus of this paper with regard to *ourself* is its Numerous function, in variation with *ourselves*. With the data above in mind, a given speaker-inventory for reflexive form-function pairings (for the purposes of this study) is described in terms of containing or not containing (±) the following forms for Numerous and Individual functions: *ourselves*-N, *ourself*-I, *themselves*-N, *themself*-N, *themselves*-I, and *themself*-I.

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 that actually exist in American English for these reflexives and second, investigate any constraints that hold over which form-function(*self/selves*-I/N) pairings may co-occur in a single speaker-inventory.

Excluding speakers who do not have either *themself* or *ourself* 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, and b) a splitting of functions, with forms restricted to either Individual or Numerous. The result in a) is the more unexpected, as it challenges a principle of synchronic morphological theory: the Blocking

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the Individual contexts I describe; "Individual" should subsume both the case in which the antecedent is trivially singular in syntactically-relevant number and the case in which *themself* or *themselves* refer anaphorically to epicene THEY. Epicene THEY denotes referents not greater than 1 in numerosity, and yet is associated with plural verb agreement, the analysis of the grammatical number of *themself* or *themself* with epicene THEY as antecedent is nontrivial (see e.g. Bender & Flickinger 1999). Thus, "Individual" and "Numerous" describe the numerosity of the pronoun's referent, depending on whether it has a real-world numerosity not greater than 1.

Effect ("a no doublets prohibition"), stated in Kroch (1994), which makes the strong prediction that a state of variation like this could only have begun (diachronically) by the novel form (e.g. *themself*) being innovated for a novel function (e.g. Individual, non-masculine, non-feminine use). As it turns out, the field of inventories attested in the study is not only bounded, but bounded in such a way as to show co-occurrence dependencies among the inventory items; some form-function pairings may only occur in an inventory alongside other form-function pairings. These co-occurrence constraints point to a diachronic story underlying the observed state of variation in which the novel forms (*themself, ourself*) were indeed innovated for novel functions. Thus, the study demonstrates that Kroch (1994)'s restrictive version of the Blocking Effect has predictive power for an entirely new data set.

Additionally, this study gained these results using novel experimental methodology.[6] Searches for instances of *themself* and *ourself* on the World Wide Web identified an initial pool of subjects whose inventories were of interest. These speakers were sent questionnaires 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, and so deserves to be counted a result of the study in its own right.

2. Data from the Questionnaire Study

The results are shown in Table 1 below. The second column from the left contains identifiers for each subject and the top row contains the form-function pairings defining the speaker-inventories. Each subject's row shows a "√" or a "*" in each of the columns for a form-function pairing, indicating whether or not a given subject tested as having reflexive in his/her grammar. Capital letters identify each unique inventory type. Note that I have not included the Standard English reflexives *themselves*-N and *ourselves*-N in Table 1 for the reason that all of the subjects tested as having

[6] It is beyond the scope of this paper to give thorough discussion of how I constructed my questionnaires, how I evaluated responses, and the relationship between this study and other approaches to experimental syntax. However, a full discussion along with test materials is available either by contacting me at the address provided at the end of the paper, or by accessing the "Supplemental Materials" link on my webpage: http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~joelcw.

those form-function pairings in their inventories. This is an important fact, but since it is invariably true across the subject population it does not play a role in separating out different speaker-inventories.

If each inventory is defined by either having or not having the four form-function pairings in Table 1, they constitute four binary features for the purpose of defining speaker-inventories, assuming there are no dependencies

Table 1.

#	Invent.	Subject	*themself*-N	*ourself*-N	*themself*-I	*t-selves*-I
1	A	Club	*	*	√	√
2	A	Rabbi	*	*	√	√
3	A	Bry	*	*	√	√
4	A	Jack	*	*	√	√
5	A	Zane	*	*	√	√
6	A	Indigo	*	*	√	√
7	A	Reindeer	*	*	√	√
8	A	Benedict	*	*	√	√
9	A	Privateer	*	*	√	√
10	A	Stephen	*	*	√	√
11	B	Glenn	√	√	√	√
12	B	Matt	√	√	√	√
13	B	Watk	√	√	√	√
14	B	KMH	√	√	√	√
15	B	Tallman	√	√	√	√
16	B	Carol	√	√	√	√
17	B	Leslie	√	√	√	√
18	C	Harris	*	*	√	*
19	C	Dan	*	*	√	*
20	C	Natalie	*	*	√	*
21	C	Rebecca	*	*	√	*
22	C	Judd	*	*	√	*
23	C	Hooker	*	*	√	*
24	D	Adam	*	√	√	√
25	D	Ajent	*	√	√	√
26	D	Captain	*	√	√	√
27	E	Craig	√	*	√	√
28	E	Mutter	√	*	√	√
29	F	Kaix	*	*	*	√
30	F	Rob	*	*	*	√
31	G	Jane	*	√	*	*
32	H	Ken	√	*	√	*
33	I	Rabbit	*	*	*	*

between the different feature-value pairings. According to the null hypothesis for this study (that there are no co-occurrence dependencies between the reflexives) one would expect the 33 subjects to fall into 16 groups with a distribution of roughly 2 subjects per group. The actual distribution of speakers in Table 1 tells a very different story. Most (= 23) of the subjects in this study cluster into groups A, B, and C with the other groups containing less than 3 subjects each, and 7 of the 16 possible speaker inventories are entirely unattested in this subject population.[7]

Speakers of type A, when faced with the question, "what should be the reflexive counterpart of the plural, yet Individual epicene THEY?," understandably cannot (metaphorically) make up their minds. It is not possible to be certain that the complex plural/Individual nature of epicene THEY is actually the reason for the existence of this inventory, but it strikes me as a reasonable hypothesis. Three of the outlying groups, F, G, and I, may also be viewed as responses to this type of scenario. Group F contains speakers who simply continue the pattern of epicene THEY, using the form associated with Standard English 3PL function, *themselves*. It is an important side note that this type of speaker may very well be the most common in the general English speaking population. Even so, F speakers are an unexpected result here since the subjects were chosen based on their production of *themself* or *ourself*; these subjects gave judgments that conflicted with their production.[8] Groups G and I appear to show actual morphological gaps for Individual function. This is another possible answer to the question of a reflexive epicene THEY (and perhaps these speakers would be forced into producing *himself or herself* or something similar). Group C is the only major grouping with no morphological doublets, those speakers having restricted *themself* to Individual function. These speakers solve the problem of epicene THEY, so to speak, in that they assign *themself* to this function alone.

The two largest groupings of speakers, inventories A and B (along with the smaller groups D, E, G, and H), show the tendency in this speaker population towards having morphological doublets. In all, a total of 24 out of 33 speakers show some kind of doublet in their inventories, with 12 speakers showing more than one; these twelve speakers show doublets both

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[7] While it is true that 33 subjects is not a large enough sample with which to make a solid statistical argument, I believe that the clustering effect (including the groups with no subjects) is impressionistically robust enough to call the null hypothesis into question, at the very least. In the next section, I will also discuss the pattern that unites a number of inventories that are not attested among the subjects.

[8] I cannot currently explain this effect; see Schütze (1996) on this issue.

for some Numerous function and for the Individual function (recall that all 33 speakers tested as accepting *themselves*-N and *ourselves*-N). Group B shows the most possible formal variation for both functions: three doublets. There are also doublets for speakers with other inventories containing *ourself*-N (groups D and G) or *themself*-N (groups B, E, H) since they also allow *ourselves*- N and *themselves*-N, respectively. The D and E speakers show the morphological doublet for Individual function as well (as in B); D and E tie for being the third-richest in morphological doublets.

3. Discussion and Analysis

The findings come into direct conflict with a principle of synchronic morphological theory that some linguists regard, according to Kroch (1994: §3.1), "as a theoretical principle which expresses a property of the human language faculty." This principle is the "Blocking Effect" (Aronoff 1976), also called (cf. Traugott 2001: 12), "the law of differentiation (Bréal 1964[1900])…synonymy avoidance (Kiparsky 1982), and the principle of contrast (E. Clark 1993)." Though it has been formulated in various ways (see Kroch 1994 and Traugott 2001 and references therein), the version in Kroch (1994) expresses the basic idea that the existence of one morphological form for a given function or semantics "blocks" the existence of another form with the same function or semantics; a "no-doublets prohibition." The classic example of this phenomenon in morphological theory (the kind discussed in Aronoff 1976) is one in which the "presence of an irregular form in a paradigmatic slot blocks the appearance of the regular form that would have occupied that slot under the relevant morphological rule" (Kroch 1994). Kroch does not believe that the Blocking Effect is restricted to this kind of case alone: cases of doublets within "morphological paradigms."[9] He states a broader Blocking Effect: "a constraint against the coexistence of functionally equivalent items" (1994: §3.3), which could be conceived as stemming from a more general psychological reality (Kroch p.c.). Traugott (2001: 13) phrases the Blocking Effect (in a weaker form) in

[9] I believe Kroch is referring to inflectional paradigms when he states that the Blocking Effect is not restricted to "morphological paradigms" (1994: §3.3). His examples in §3.1 and §3.2 appear to be of formal doublets associated with inflectional functions, while his examples in §3.3 (where he asserts the more general version of the Blocking Effect) seem to be of doublets associated with derivational processes or doublets associated with a particular semantics (even though they are not necessarily morphologically related forms). Traugott (2001) focuses on the latter types of examples.

terms of a constraint on the diachronic development of forms rather than as a synchronic constraint: "if a new form is innovated, (e.g. *cooker*), then it can be expected to mean something different from a related form (*cooker* will not mean the same thing as *cook*)." Both Traugott and Kroch point out that morphological doublets are, in fact, common in the world's languages and that this state of affairs begs for some kind of reconsideration of the Blocking Effect as a universal principle. The data from my study represent yet another case that challenges any strict formulation of the Blocking Effect as a universal principle; it reveals doublets for the following (reflexive/emphatic) functions: first-person Numerous (inventories B, D, G), third-person Numerous (inventories B, E, H), and third-person Individual (inventories A, B, D, E, F).

Kroch (1994) proposes one answer to morphological doublets while still asserting the Blocking Effect as a principle. He makes the empirical claim that doublets arise through some situation external to the individual speaker, such as language/dialect contact. Although the grammar of a speaker may be prompted into admitting and maintaining morphological doublets as the result of some set of external factors (e.g. language contact and the sociolinguistic significance of variable forms), a grammar does not spontaneously innovate doublets. This allows Kroch (1994) to maintain that a grammar containing doublets is an inherently disfavored situation, at least from the perspective of an individual speaker's system; Kroch weakens the Blocking Effect just enough that it does not categorically rule out the possibility of doublets. Kroch (1994: §3.1) also indicates that there must be external factors present for speakers to continue to use the new forms: "They may borrow this foreign form into their own speech and writing for its sociolinguistic value or even just because it is frequent in their language environment." In this way, Kroch has reformulated the Blocking Effect as a diachronic constraint similar to Traugott (2001:13); it is a hard constraint on innovation, but a soft constraint on synchronic morphological inventories. A grammar containing morphological doublets is not a stable situation (barring some sociolinguistic utility of the variants), and so one of the two forms in a synchronic doublet should eventually supplant the other in use or become semantically specialized such that there is a functional distinction between the two forms.

Traugott (2001: 13-14) does not attempt to save the Blocking Effect as a universal principle to the extent that Kroch does. She believes that there is sufficient evidence to reject the Blocking Effect as a constraint preventing certain kinds of innovations. As Traugott views doublet-forming innovation as a valid diachronic option for grammars, she has no need to argue that cases of doublets are always the result of language-contact or other external

factors. Like Kroch, Traugott discusses the generalization that new forms associated with the same semantics as some older form tend to either specialize semantically or disappear over time, but she does not state this as a necessary outcome: "anti-synonymy, in so far as it operates, does so AFTER a form has come into existence; it does not block innovation but rather motivates realignment among forms competing for survival over time" (2001: 14). The data presented in Table 1 are entirely expected under this view of the Blocking Effect, though it is impossible to know from this study alone whether the doublets in the relevant inventories will undergo a process of semantic specialization at some point in the future.

While the data in Table 1 present difficulties for the Blocking Effect in Kroch (1994), it is possible to reconcile the two. Although this study cannot address the question of whether there will eventually be semantic readjustment in the inventories with morphological doublets, that possibility is certainly present and so the simple existence of such inventories is not necessarily problematic for Kroch. Inventory C, the third largest grouping of speakers, does actually show a complete state of specialization with only one form per function; the *–self* morphology is restricted to Individual function and the *–selves* morphology is restricted to Numerous function. However, the fact that such a high proportion of the test subjects show inventories with some kind of doublet suggests that this is a strong (if not necessarily stable) situation synchronically.

Kroch's reliance on language contact and sociolinguistic factors as a mechanism for explaining doublets, on the other hand, is more difficult to reconcile with the data from this study. Data as in (8), (10), and in (11) and (12) below from the subject "Glenn" show that some speakers with doublets can use both forms for the same function with little intervening discourse. This also means that they are using both forms in a doublet in the same sociolinguistic setting (style, register, etc.):

(11) The PR person thinks themself important (and can be) by connecting the people actually doing things….

(12) The PR person naturally thinks of themselves as the most important element of that conduit in order to do their job. (http://glennf.weblogs.com/2001/02/14)

It is difficult to see what sociolinguistic factors distinguish the two forms to the extent that the persistence of the doublet would be motivated. It would also be extremely difficult to argue that there was some large-scale language or dialect-contact situation of the kind Kroch discusses with regard to English past tense doublets, for example. In that case, Kroch (1994: §3.2) argues (with references therein) that these doublets arose through contact between Norse-speaking settlers and English speakers in the north of

England. Any contact situation even near that grand a level is unlikely to exist for the variation uncovered by this study.

On the other hand, if we reinterpret Kroch's notion of language contact as contact between speakers with slightly different grammars rather than as contact between largely different varieties (the "seeds of variation" model of Zwicky 2002), then there is a more subtle diachronic explanation that would be wholly predicted under Kroch (1994). The original speakers could have innovated the forms *themself* and *ourself* solely for the Individual and CMI functions, respectively. This type of innovation is predicted under Kroch's model and does not seem at all unlikely, given that it would simply involve generalizing of the *–self* morphology with the Individual function that it already serves in *himself*, *myself*, etc. These new *ourself*-CMI and *themself*-I form-function pairings could have then served as the "seeds" (as in Zwicky 2002 and Zwicky p.c.) for planting a growing state of variation; as the original, innovating speakers used the forms in the presence of other speakers, the next group of speakers would acquire the forms but interpret their functions slightly differently. This situation could repeat from speaker to speaker until a state of variation had arisen like the one captured in Table 1. This is a plausible, if speculative, account of the spread of *themself* and *ourself* for different functions, and its possibility prevents this data from necessarily being a counterexample to Kroch (1994)'s Blocking Effect.

Additionally, the data suggest some type of co-occurrence restrictions on the items that may appear in speaker inventories. The two Individual form-function pairings, *themself*-I and *themselves*-I, vary independently of the other potential inventory items, occurring with the Numerous *–self* items, as in inventories B, D, and E, or without them, as in A, C, and F. There may be a tendency for the items *themself*-I and *themselves*-I to co-occur in inventories, as they do in A, B, D, and E, but they clearly may occur independently of each other as well, as in C, F, and H. An inventory must be able to contain *themself*-I without *themselves*-I in order for there to be a possibility of specializing the *–self* and *–selves* morphologies for Individual and Numerous functions, respectively. This type of non-doublet inventory is theoretically important, as I pointed out above, as well as being relatively well attested in my sample of subjects (6 speakers). The pairing *themself*-N, on the other hand, does not vary independently from all of the other items. *themself*-I occurs in a number of inventories without *themself*-N, but *themself*-N does not occur in any inventory that does not also include *themself*-I. I'll call this Co-Occurrence Generalization #1: *themself*-N → *themself*-I. It is probably not accidental that this dependency exists between two inventory items that share a single form. If COG #1 is actually a restriction on the scope of variation and not just a statement that happens to

be true, it may help in explaining why a number of inventories are unattested in the speaker population: 4 out of the 7 unattested inventories would have contained *themself*-N without *themself*-I, and so would be exceptions to COG #1. Another possible dependency is *ourself*-N → *themself*-I, but group G (one speaker, Jane) is a counterexample. Without Jane's results, *ourself*-N would appear to be dependent of the presence of *themself*-I, and then both *themself*-N and *ourself*-N could be viewed as dependent on the presence of *themself*-I. However, Jane's results show *ourself*-N varying independently of the other potential inventory items.

There may also be a tendency for the two Numerous *–self* items to pattern together; this generalization holds for all but 7 subjects. This is a pattern one would expect if *–self* were spreading as an undifferentiated (for Numerous and Individual) marker of reflexivity/emphasis, as it was in the Early Modern English period; consider the following sentences:

(13) ***a*1548** HALL *Chron., Edw. IV* 239 Hys heyres and successors..by them self, or their deputie should offer a hart of lyke weight and value. (OED 1989: 892)

(14) **1549** COVERDALE, etc. *Erasm. Par. Rom.* 38 Vnlearned people.., whiche thinke nothing rightful, but that them selfe do. (OED 1989: 892)

(15) **1563** *Homilies* II. *Matrimony* (1859) 501 For this folly is ever..grown up with us,..to think highly by ourself, so that none thinketh it meet to give place to another. (OED 1989: 995)

(16) **1566** in Ellis *Orig. Lett.* Ser. I. II. 208 We fynde the same confirmed by the parties self that were ther present. (OED 1989: 905)

A similar system also exists for speakers of some non-American varieties of English, as in Shorrocks' (1999) description of the Bolton dialect of northern England. Group B actually has this undifferentiated *–self* system, but it is merged with the normative system of Numerous *–selves* pronouns, and so B speakers exhibit a large degree of optionality in their reflexive inventories.

There are two types of explanation that could account for any COGs in the data. The first is that there are actual co-occurrence restrictions on the inventories synchronically; there is some set of active constraints in the morphological system that makes certain combinations of form-function pairings in a single inventory inherently impossible and other combinations mandatory. The second option for explaining restrictions on the scope of variation is to say that there are no actual synchronic constraints inherent in the inventories, but rather that patterns of co-occurrence are the artifact of how the variation spread diachronically. If the variation spread in such a way that a subsequent innovation of a form-function pairing X required that

a given speaker already had form-function pairing Y in his/her inventory, then a snapshot of the change in progress taken at one stage would show what looks like a dependency X → Y across all of the inventories. The data are consistent with both explanations, and they could both potentially apply.. Moreover, if the second explanation does apply, that fact will never be provable on the basis of a snapshot alone; it would be like looking at the rings in a cross-section of a tree trunk without any information about the age of the tree or how trees grow. Nevertheless, I would like to cautiously suggest that the second approach is more explanatory of COG #1 than the first, essentially because it is difficult to imagine any theoretical reason for a synchronic dependency of *themself*-N on *themself*-I. There is, however, a diachronic sequence of events that would lead to such a situation.

As it turns out, the diachronic hypothesis that explains COG #1 is precisely the type of development predicted by the Blocking Effect from Kroch (1994). If *themself* were originally innovated in order to serve as the reflexive counterpart of epicene THEY, then the original speakers with the form *themself* were of type C. C speakers could have begun a situation of variation with *themself*-I as the seed. As these speakers encountered other speakers, the secondary speakers acquired *themself* with Individual function, but not interpreting the form *themself* to be restricted to Individual function; the reanalysis was not a catastrophic one but rather a generalizing of the function associated with *themself*. This hypothesis is by no means farfetched, given that the second group of speakers would be presented with only positive data from which to infer the function of *themself* (there would be no negative data to prevent the generalizing of its function). This is roughly the same story that Kroch (1994) would need to hypothesize in order to explain the data in Table 1 in accord with his Blocking Effect. Therefore, with the caveat that this diachronic account is speculative, COG #1 gives a type of independent motivation for a sequence of events that Kroch (1994) would predict for purely theoretical reasons. Kroch (1994)'s Blocking Effect has actual predictive power.

4. Conclusion

A complex state of variation currently exists among American English speakers in a piece of their reflexive pronoun inventories, and moreover, this variation may be used to test principles of synchronic and diachronic morphology. The study also demonstrates the usefulness of targeted email questionnaires in assessing morphosyntactic variation.

The variation turned out to be quite extensive for these linguistic features, existing both across speakers and within the inventories of

individual speakers. The clustering of subjects around certain inventory types shows that although the scope of the variation is wide, it is not without limit. Observed dependencies in the co-occurrence of the inventory items within individual inventories constitute a type of limit on the scope of variation and point to a history underlying the *themselves*/*themself* phenomenon: *themself*-I appears to be the original innovation (for the specific function of being epicene THEY's reflexive counterpart). This is precisely the predicted state of affairs if Kroch (1994)'s restriction on innovation is combined with Zwicky (2002)'s understanding of how variation spreads. This study therefore provides new support for the theory of morphosyntactic variation that results from the combination of these two perspectives.

The results in this paper suggest that small, subtle situations of morphological variation may bear on larger theoretical concerns. It is my hope that they prove sufficient to strongly encourage further research into this kind of variation and into the constraints upon it.

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