Person-neutral ownself in two varieties of Asian English

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In certain varieties of English spoken in Asia, there is an additional -self anaphor not found in other parts of the English-speaking world:

**Example (Representative twitter sentences)**

- When someone defends ownself after adding on an ugly deed...
- I just ownself play the colour curves.
- You ownself also party a lot.

**Two key things to note:**
1. We can find ownself in any of the three most common positions for a -self pronoun
2. The antecedents all have different person features
Main Questions

- What is the distribution of this anaphor (functionally and geographically)?
- What is at the root of the (we shall see) observed relationship between geographic and functional distributions?
- How can we account for the lack of agreement within a Kratzerian (2009) framework?
Outline

1. Today’s Puzzle
2. Prior Discussion
3. Corpus Data
4. Twitter Data
5. Capturing the Variation
6. Formalizing the Analysis
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There is one example of this in scholarly writing about “Butler’s English” in India:

**Example**

Butler’s every day taking one ollock for **ownself**. (Hosali 2005: 34)

- No discussion or analysis of the anaphor, but…it’s there.
- No grammatical description of Indian English or published glossaries that I have checked even mention this anaphor.
Some sources (Sridhar 1996, Sedlatschek 2009) do mention a person-neutral *itself* in Indian English:

**Example**

If you falter in the first few steps *itself*? (Sridhar 1996: ex 22)

We are feeling tired now *itself*. (ICE-India: S1A-092.txt)

- This is limited to adverbial or possibly adnominal uses
- Sridhar proposes transfer from Kannada -e
Wee (2007) reports on *ownself* as a feature of Singapore English. The lack of agreement is noted. He reports that *ownself* is barred from argument positions:

**Example**

- He *ownself* open the door. (Wee 2007: ex.2a) Adnominal
- He always *ownself* sweep the floor. (Wee 2007: ex.13a) Adverbial
- * He cut *ownself*. (Wee 2007: ex.12a) Argument
- *Ownself* is a transfer from Mandarin *ziji*, which is person-neutral, and can be used in the same Adnominal and Adverbial contexts.
- His proposal is that the canonical agreeing forms retain the function of co-argument reflexivity while *ownself* is used in these more emphatic contexts.

**Unexplained Question**

Mandarin *ziji* is also used in argument positions. Singapore English has apparently added a distinction to the grammar.
Corpus Searches

- Curated corpora to search for more examples “in the wild”
- ICE Corpora for India and Singapore (2002) were consulted; no instances of ownself in either, but a small number of Indian English itself
- GloWbE (Global Web-Based English, collected in 2012) provides 21 examples

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Country</th>
<th>Adnominal</th>
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<th>Argument</th>
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<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some Examples

- India uses PP complement and VP complement *ownself* (as do Bangladesh and Pakistan)

**Example**

You are the maker of *ownself*. (GloWbE w_in_b06.txt)

Because it’s just make *ownself* fool in front of patriarchy unit. (GloWbE w_in_g09.txt)

- The two argument position examples from Singapore are equally clear:

**Example**

But just tell *ownself*, make-up is not to let the world know. (GloWbE w_sg_b01.txt)

I used to use it in the same way ... to keep *ownself* a bit far from the crowd. (GloWbE w_sg_b02.txt)

- Remember, Wee says these should be ungrammatical
The News on the Web (NOW) corpus spans from 2010 to early 2018, constantly growing.

These results represent data available online up to May 2018.

The data is a bit uneven; datasets from 2010 are 1/8 the size of 2017.

From here on, I collapse my data into three regional categories:

1. South Asian English (SAsE): Bangladesh, India, Pakistan
2. Southeast Asian English (SEAsE): Singapore, Malaysia
3. Other: Rest of the world
### NOW Results

<table>
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<th>Argument</th>
<th>Adjective</th>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Question

**What happened?**
82 of those 94 Argument uses appear in one common construction: 

ownself VERB ownself

By early fall 2017, this is being used in Netflix advertising for Singapore
The corpus data show that this anaphor seems to have fairly broad use in Singapore.

- Less frequent but stable use in South Asia.
- Wee’s claim about this being blocked from argument positions in Singapore English is clearly disproven.
- For various reasons, the corpus data is so sparse and/or imbalanced that we can’t do much more than look at these things.
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Two twitter data samples were collected in 2017, pre-memification.

The first was a week-long global twitter search, where each token was assigned to a country by post-hoc verification.

The second was a month long collection, using the geographic coordinates of key cities in the region.

All collections were cleared of retweets and other repetitions of content.
Only 4 of the 22 argument position uses in SEAsE are *ownself check ownself* (used compositionally).

South Asia is holding to this pattern of almost exclusive argument position use.

“Other” is fairly scattered, including one likely bot.
\( \chi^2 = 43.553 \ p < 0.001, \) demonstrating a significant difference between groups.

- Same result if “Other” is excluded
Now 12 of the 35 argument position uses in SEAsE are compositional uses of *ownself* check *ownself*, an additional 3 are meta.

South Asia still holding stable.
\(\chi^2 = 15.194\ p < 0.001\), demonstrating a significant difference between groups

• Clear regional difference with repeated data sets
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Sharma (2009) looks at differences between Indian English and Singapore English on three different phenomena:

- Past tense omission
- Copula omission
- Extension of the progressive -ing

She argues that differences between the varieties can be accounted for through examination of the substrate languages, primarily Hindi and Mandarin.
Hindi has a person-neutral anaphor which is inflected according to the case position it occupies: *ap, āpne, āpna* (Kachru 2006)

Bengali has a person-neutral anaphor *nije* which can be used adnominally if it takes the case marking of the adjacent antecedent (Sengupta 2000)

Kannada has a verbal suffix *-koND* to express reflexivity, with a distinct optional anaphor *taan* to occupy the argument position (Lidz 1995)

For none of these is there complete identity between the forms used in argument positions and the forms used as modifiers
Mandarin *ziji* and Cantonese *zigei* can be used in all three major functions with no additional morphology (Yip and Tang 1998).

Seeing *ownself* in SEAsE occurring in all three positions strengthens Wee’s claim that there is transfer from the substrate into English.

However, this means that the function of *ownself* in the grammar needs to be re-examined.

**Question**

Has *ownself* displaced the canonical reflexives from any one function?
Twitter Baseline *himself* usage

- $\chi^2 = 24.149 \ p < 0.001$, significant difference between groups
- The difference goes in the opposite direction now
- Ownself has not completely displaced *himself* from any function, contra Wee
In Mandarin and Cantonese, \textit{ziji} exists alongside a full set of agreeing anaphors for the argument positions.

Using \textit{ziji} as an argument has a number of emphatic or discourse-sensitive connotations; as a modifier there are no other choices.

At least for Kannada, we see something similar where reflexivity can be optionally emphasized.

Wee’s main claim that \textit{ownself} has an emphatic connotation can be maintained, but it is not so simple as saying modifiers are emphatic while argument positions are not.
Today's Puzzle

Prior Discussion

Corpus Data

Twitter Data

Capturing the Variation

Formalizing the Analysis
Reflexive pronouns are the spellout manifestations of a featureless variable picking up $\phi$-features from its binder:

\[
\text{I} \ [v', \lambda n \ [VP \ hit \ n]]
\]

\[
[1SG] \ [REFL] \ [REFL] \ [1SG]
\]

Agreement links the antecedent’s features to the binder, the bundle is transmitted through binding, spellout takes care of the form

**Question**

How can a person-neutral reflexive result from this mechanism?
Getting this all to work is important because there are some cases where the same antecedent binds different anaphors:

Example

U ownself expose yourself idiot (@JinnAnn 2017-05-18)

They have been accorded the right to ownself clear ownself and whitewash themselves. (NOW: sg-08-17)

It would be nice if we could account for all of these within a single binding story
In the SEAsE case, my proposal is simply that in addition to the featureless \( n \) which generates the canonical paradigm, there is an alternate version with an [EMPH] feature.

This will be bound in the same way, usable in all positions, but add a sense of emphasis.

Ordered spellout rules (more specific before more general) will ensure that anything with the [EMPH] feature will spell out as \( \text{ownself} \).

To account for the difference in SAsE, where this can only be used in argument positions, the [EMPH] variable may also be specified as [REFL].
Conclusion

- *Ownself* is an anaphor unique to two macro-varieties of Asian English, with different distributions in each.
- This difference can be attributed to differences in the substrate languages.
- In both varieties, *ownself* is a part of the *-self* paradigm, but has not taken over any single function: its purpose seems to either be emphatic or possibly sociolinguistic.
- With some additional assumptions about the features underlying the semantics, we can fit this into a Kratzerian story, and formalize the difference between varieties.
Lingering Questions

- Where and when did this start?
- Did one group pick it up from the other?
- Why is this only happening in these particular contact situations?
- Wasn’t there something ages back in the slides about an adjectival use?
- Has this meme totally changed things in the past year?
References

Davies, Mark. 2013a. *Corpus of global web-based English: 1.9 billion words from speakers in 20 countries (GloWbE).* Available online at http://corpus.byu.edu/glowbe/.

Davies, Mark. 2013b. *Corpus of news on the web (NOW): 3+ billion words from 20 countries, updated every day.* Available online at http://corpus.byu.edu/now/.


The NOW corpus also shows a very recent development where *ownself* is being used as a DP-internal possessor.

**Example**

Did my town council ownself appoint own panel to sue ownself using *ownself* money for the legal costs? (NOW: sg-07-17)

To the PAP, they only trust *ownself* own people. (NOW: sg-11-17)

This somewhat tracks with the parallel with *ziji*, but not quite, as Mandarin would require a *de* particle here.
Teo Hong
about 10 months ago

Marine Parade Town Council

Cleaning Team for Your Block

Cleaning Supervisor
MOKTAR

Cleaner
MOKTAR

Ownself check Ownself
NOW Change over Time

![Graph showing change over time](image)
These topics noted above were sometimes the centrepiece for friendly banter and debate I really enjoyed between my neighbour Linda Godfrey and ownself as we would take breaks from lawn mowing, raking or digging, just to have a chatty across the fence interlude so we could solve all the world's problems before lunch.
Some examples (again from Singapore) are harder to classify:

**Example**

*Ownself* taking MRT and judging people who take the MRT.  
(GloWbE w\_sg\_g05.txt)

- Is *ownself* the subject of the sentence, or an adverbial modifier to a pro-dropped sentence?
- Ultimately, I call this an adverbial, based on further data (and the fact that we know this variety of English to be pro-drop)
The verb in this construction is highly flexible

Most important are cases where the construction is in an embedded clause or after an adverb

Example

**Ownself** start newspapers to **ownself** advertise **ownself** (NOW: sg-11-16)

Remember PAP always **ownself** praise **ownself** (NOW: sg-12-17)

The first **ownself** in the construction is most often adverbial

This motivates a treatment of (some) sentence initial **ownself** as adverbial

Note that in the corpus counts, I only include this construction as a single argument token
Only two sentence-initial uses of ownself are considered to be subjects:

Instances where ownself is followed by an auxiliary

Instances where the verb would not easily support an adverbial reading (i.e. before (dropped) copulas and unaccusatives)

**Example**

*Ownself* must cook. (@JonathanGoh 2017-06-18)

Think *ownself* very smart. (@_auhee 2017-06-05)

*Ownself* die. (NOW: sg-06-16)
Comparing Overall Usage

- In GloWbE, ownself has a frequency of 0.15/million words in India vs. 0.23 in Singapore.
- The reverse is seen for himself: 188.02/million in India vs 138.59 in Singapore.
- Ownself may be displacing the canonical paradigm in both regions; the difference can be a result of the wider distribution of ownself in SEAsE.
- To test this, a week’s worth of himself was gathered from twitter as a baseline comparison.