Variation within Variation: 
The use of non-standard reflexive forms in English

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1. The Theoretical Issue

Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002) propose that across (and within) languages, different pronouns may have different internal syntactic structures.

The different structures correspond to different binding possibilities. D heads are proposed to be full referring expressions, therefore being referentially independent; P represents a bound variable, and phrases inherit the properties of their heads.

Nonstandard English provides a clear test case for this hypothesis, as many dialects have (at least) two variants for some reflexive pronouns: The resulting prediction is clear: DP reflexives in non-standard varieties of English

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Prediction: only pronouns with a P structure should be able to occur as semantically bound variables.

Within individual speakers who have adopted the variant, there should be a systematic usage: standard accusative is still found in bound variable contexts.

2. The Existing Accounts

Most discussion of these variant forms is limited to describing their geographical distribution.

Genitive Reflexives (GRs) are known to be features of Southern American English, African American Vernacular English (Green 2002), and certain UK dialects (Cheshire et al. 1993).

Cheshire et al. treats this variation as simple paradigm levelling.

Paradigm-levelling does not make the same prediction regarding bound variables: there should be no intra-speaker variation.

If paradigm levelling is true, speakers adopting the variant should not be sensitive to the syntactic or semantic environment.

3. Checking COCA

A first check was run using the Corpus of Contemporary American English, restricted to 1990-2010.

Hisself occurs 192 times. No instances of a structure like (1), but parallels to (2) are attested:

(1) Every boy hurt hisself. (unattested structure)

(2) Every NOUN VERB himself. (13 hits for this frame)

Theirselfs occurs 39 times. No instances of a structure like (3), but parallels to (4) are attested:

(3) ...each subject rated theirselves (unattested structure)

(4) ...each NOUN VERB themselves (3 hits for this frame)

One potential bound variable usage, but mitigated through coordination:

(5) ...the notion that just anybody could come over here and set theirselves up as an American.

So far, predictions of the P-P analysis are supported.

4. Global Twitter Search

24 hours worth of 10 variants collected: hisself, herself, theirselves, theirselves, theirselves, theirselves, theirselves, theirselves. 86% of the results are trackable to the USA, concentrated among African American speakers in the South and major urban areas of the Northeast + some caucasian speakers in Appalachia and the South.

Hisself occurs 706 times. As a bound variable only in the fixed expression every man for hisself (3 instances). In 200 instances of himself on twitter, there are 5 quantifier antecedents.

Theirselfs occurs 473 times. As a bound variable 63 times, but 30% of these are from outside the USA. Bound variable uses within the USA occur in areas with low overall usage (Pacific Northwest, Alaska, Caucasians in the Northeast).

Themselves and theirself occur as bound variables for African Americans most frequently in those areas where theirselves and hisself are most densely used too.

Evidence of tweeters making conscious choices regarding which variant to use:

(6)user @LUCKTII.ITwEEEE
   a. hees be contradicting theirselves (Jan 10, 2013)
   b. too many bitches out here tryna be everybody else but themselves (Feb 6, 2013)

5. Geotagged Tweet Search

2nd twitter corpus using the coordinates of major North American cities as part of the search term. Time depth was increased to one week spanning Thanksgiving

Major regional patterns of the first corpus are replicated.

Still no instances of quantifier antecedents for hisself.

Nominative forms dominate the Southwest, strongly present in the South, Great Lakes, and DMV, but fade through the Tri-State. Absent from New England (NE), Pacific Northwest (PNW).

Morphologically singular th- forms used exclusively as bound variable in Appalachia, roughly 50% as variable in the South, Great Lakes, DMV.

Bound variable theirselves more prevalent as a portion of total use in those areas where a singular form is less frequent.

6. Follow-Up and Conclusions

Results for hisself remain consistent across three corpora. In an online judgment test, sentences such as (1) were the only ones to be universally rejected.

Following more recent work of Balit et al. (2013), pronouns may belong to more than one category defined in the original typology.

An unexpected variable is the interaction between number morphology and a nominative form (which may be a re-analysis of r-less theirselves).

With only two forms, the himself/hisself alternation appears to form a stable paradigm along the lines of the original Déchaine and Wiltschko prediction.

With up to nine competing variants of th- forms, different patterns of re-analysis may be underway in different communities.

Singualar forms serving as bound variables fill a different gap in the English pronominal paradigm: a gender neutral morphologically singular reflexive:

(7) sample uses of bound variable singulars
   a. Every man for theyselves (NYC)
   b. no artist makes it by theyselves (Pittsburgh)
   c. How can you be blamed if someone killed theirselves? (Houston)
   d. If everybody was focused on theirselves instead of always being in the next mf business... (Chicago)

References and Acknowledgements

Thanks to:


London: Longman.

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