Variation in English Third Person Plural - self forms

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1 Issue

English third person -self forms are canonically formed from an accusative form rather than a genitive, but some dialects of the US and UK allow a genitive:

1. Miles redeemed hisself.
2. They should be proud of theirselves.

Two clear analyses present themselves: this either reflects a syntactic difference, or is merely morphological paradigm levelling.

Cheshire et al (1993) makes the levelling claim for UK varieties. Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002) predicts the genitives should be full possessive DPs, and resist quantificational binding, in parallel to other languages.

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Resisting quantificational binding indicates a more complex syntax.
No difference suggests paradigm levelling.

2 Prior Analyses

Starting from DARE (Cassidy and Houston Hall 1991), all of the examples of hisself have referential antecedents. COCA (1990-2010) also shows this:

3. Every boy hurt himself. (unattested structure)
4. Every NOUN VERB himself. (13 hits for this frame)

A 2013 twitter sample (reported at LSA 2015) shows the same pattern. In 706 tokens, the only counterexample (n=3) was in use of every man for hisself.

63/473 tokens of theirselves acting as bound variable though. Still, some users demonstrated the predicted pattern, switching forms between tweets:

5. Hoes be contradicting theirselves
6. Too many bitches out here tryna be everybody else but themselves

However, the third person plural has many more variants. Also, most of the bound variable tokens came from regions not identified in DARE.

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3 Re-Examining theirselves

Using twitter (Gentry 2015), a new global baseline was collected in 2018:

- n=5000 for theirselves and themselves
- Filtered for re-tweets and other obvious repetitions
- Final totals of 1106 theirselves tokens and 721 themselves tokens
- Initially coded for six major types of antecedent and five functional uses

Themselves and theirselves differ significantly in both classifications:

- $X^2(5) = 29.538, p < 0.001$ (antecedents)
- $X^2(4) = 16.743, p = 0.0022$ (functions)

BUT the antecedent differences just in the proportions of various definite DPs. Compare to 5.54% vs 4.97% for strong quantifier examples:

7. I think every player on the Red Sox asks theirselves this question. (StrongQ)
8. Most people aren’t educating theirselves. (WeakQ)

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4 Animacy

Both were also coded for animacy of antecedent:

- $X^2(1) = 20.412, p < 0.001$
- Neither favours inanimate antecedents, but themselves has over 3x as many (1.71% vs 5.67%)

Significant effect for animacy of antecedent suggests possession.

5 Becoming theirselves

Tokens for theirselves were also collected. Only 59 unique tokens in a single sample (roughly one week).

- No strong quantifier antecedents!
- Same strong(er) bias against inanimate antecedents! (1.71% vs 1.69%)

Unlike theirselves, the dataset for theirselves is more immediately identifiable as having characteristics of AAVE:

9. Did they play theirselves tho?
10. They feeling theirselves!

This suggests a historical change based on a known AAVE process of de-rhoticization (Pollock and Berni 1996). Global users of the theirselves variant may have adopted the form as a case of levelling.

6 Conclusion and Next Steps

Themselves provides the missing plural evidence to support the complex syntax analysis. However, there is still an interaction with number marking that needs to be studied in detail:

11. Everyone must have a secret for theysself.
10. Every neighborhood can police theyselves.

Theyself yields 350 unique tokens, and strong quantifier binding is evident. This predicts that the animacy bias should weaken.

For theirselves users, geography should also play a role. Speakers in regions identified by DARE may pattern as AAVE theirselves users.

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References
