Non-binary third person reflexives in English, and the construction of identity

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they and definite referents

English *they/them/their* are well-attested as singular forms

Bjorkman (2017) and Conrod (2018) both note that variable binding facilitates singular usage of these pronouns:

(1) Someone left their jockstrap in the locker room.

This suggests that the *th-* forms are not spelling out plurality, they are spelling out a lack of specification.

Definiteness marginally inhibits acceptability of the sentence for some speakers:

(2) That guy we saw left their jockstrap in the locker room.
(3) ? Wolfgang left their jockstrap in the locker room.
**-self and binding**

Conrod (2018) also notes that bound forms tend to have stricter agreement with their antecedents than referential pronouns.

Reflexive (-self) forms are most likely to be considered bound.

Kratzer (2009) argues that reflexives are built from the interaction between a featureless variable, a binder at $\nu$, and the $\phi$-features of the antecedent.

The resulting feature bundle gets its final form after spellout:

$$ (4) \text{Nomi} [\nu' \lambda n [\text{hurt } n]] \rightarrow \text{“Nomi hurt herself.”} $$

Under this view, a $\text{th}$- reflexive should only emerge if a very limited set of features is transferred.
Spelling out -selves

In a singular context though, no matter what (if any) gender features might be transmitted, nothing should trigger the plural affix that gives us -selves

First question: is -selves really plural?

Related question: does prescriptive pressure to use -selves extend into non-binary or neopronoun uses?

SPOILER: The answers will be “sort of” and “no, not really”.
About those neopronouns

Raymond (2016) examines the choice of tú/vos/usted in Spanish

The choices between pronouns (including additional deferential forms) is described as doing more than referring; speaker identity and the relationship between interlocutors is being constructed

As suggested in Conrod’s 2019 LSA talk, the choice of third person pronoun can be conceived of as a similar type of identity building.

Other big question: Will patterns emerge in the choices of neopronoun reflexives?

Last spoiler: Yes, but some unexpected things emerge.
Gameplan

First talk about *th*-forms

Highlights from the neopronoun paradigms
th- reflexive search

Global search of Twitter using twitteR (Gentry 2015) in June 2018

Searched for the most recent 5000 tweets containing a th- reflexive

Filtering for retweets and other obvious reduplications, robust corpora for 5 forms:

theyself (355)      theirselves (67)
themself (1800)     themselves (1171)
theirself (322)     theirselves (1649)

The number asymmetry makes stats tricky, just going to report trends from proportions
th- reflexive coding

Coded for four main variables:

Number of antecedent (singular or plural)

Animacy of antecedent (animate or inanimate)

Type of antecedent (Definiteness, quantifier, etc...) “Is this a bound variable?”

Function of the reflexive

This was all partially in aid of another research question around whether the specific th-forms related to bound variable uses
Plural form, context, and binding

*themselves* and *themselves* are at about 12-13% singular use; *themselves* only 3%

*themself* is majority **singular** (58%) while *theirself* is 36% singular; *theyself* 23%

The *-selves* forms derive proportionally more of their singular uses from bound variable contexts than the *-self* forms

Some clear cases showing that even when gender is known, it is not expressed:

(5) ...**he’s** just just someone calling *themself* a vegan to get a rise out of us.

That we get any singular uses at all with *-selves* is going to be an open question for the Kratzer (2009) story


The clear outlier

The *they*- forms are the most conservative (least likely to be singular or bound)

They are also the most sociolinguistically cohesive; they belong to African American English

The story I was selling last week is that this is a reanalyzed *theirself* retaining a grammar where there is a more articulated syntactic structure
th- forms and identity

Contrary to prescriptivist dreams, th- is not spelling out plurality

In the reflexive paradigm, this is even easier to pull out, as there’s a secondary way to make a number contrast which is also being avoided

But, there’s some (slight) evidence that even -selves is losing plurality in the wider population

Theyself(f/ves) is clearly a sociolinguistic marker, but it is not SOGI

The grammar seems to be tolerant of singular th- reflexives, but they are so widespread as to not construct a unique identity for users
Refreshing the research questions

Will this bleaching of plurality from \textit{-selves} extend into neopronouns that are being used to construct unique identities?

Are specific neopronouns associated with any other variables?
Collecting neopronoun forms

Same twitteR tool, but two four-week windows (July 2018 and May 2019)

Neopronoun reflexive forms were gathered from various lists and fed into an R script that ran once a week for four weeks (consistent overlap in collection windows)

680 in 2018 data, only 515 in the 2019 data

In both cases, only about 5% of the usage was in full sentences as an apparent construction of some form of queer identity

Only two or three really noteworthy changes in distribution from 2018 to 2019
Coding neopronoun forms

The clearest way to go was to code by what they were being used for:

**Legit Use:** The form is used in at least a sentence fragment, other evidence of intentional usage (e.g. matching pronouns) is present. User profile showing a pronoun paradigm is also a good sign, but can’t look like it might just be a typo.

**Educational:** The tweet is meant to educate the audience on the use of non-binary pronouns or other gender related issues. Overall sense is that the pronoun is the subject of discussion, but in a positive light.

**Bot Art:** The tweet is the result of a script creating an art project. This can be captured by formulaic tweets, as well as metadata and a set frequency of tweets per day.
False Positive: The tweet shows other dialectal features including World Englishes, or intentional ironic misspelling with no sense of malice (toward the queer community).

Hate/Irony: The tweet is meant to denigrate queer non-binary identity, or express other associated socially conservative views.

Questionable: There is clear queer identity present in the profile of the user and/or content of the tweet, but looks like it might be a typo (oddly only for one form).

Prescriptivism: The tweet is expressing a language attitude, but no explicit mention of identity (only relevant to the World English tweets)
The Bots

These appear to be bots coded to produce formulaic text with very robust pronoun paradigms

Some are pure comedy or art, others are more practical (e.g. creating D&D character profiles)

These are 10% of both data sets, spread across many forms

Perself, thonselv, virselv only show up in these tweets or “Educational” pronoun lists
The *em*- forms

In 2018, *emself* was the most frequent Legit Use; not used in this way at all in the 2019 set

*Emself* and *emselves* (possibly with apostrophe) are the most common forms overall, but mostly False Positive coming from UK/Irish/Australian English

*Emselves* was the only form with a -*ves* ending to come close to being coded as Legit Use (also 2018)
In the top five most frequent for both datasets

Obviously could just be typos (one key off), but at least one is a *Finnegan’s Wake* bot

All of the Questionable uses (only 9) are here, showing up in third person narratives

Well, the reasons weren't that jealousy-worthy. Running around to keep humself hidden was more of a reason.

`sleeping. you did good work, hira.`  `ooh. i`  `i mean, i know you mean it.`

The pokemon smiled, clearly pleased with the appreciation. Katsuo returned the smile, sending it back to the pokeball.
faeself

The only one that shows up as a point of contention within the community (and only as such)

Nobody is using it in the data, but people talk about it.

whenever someones like ‘i dont care about pronouns call me anything :)’ i have the strongest urge to use faeself to see what they think

6:27 PM - 19 May 2019
Rare ones that are only shared between Legit Use and Bots

eirself and verself only appear in the 2019 data as used by humans

zemself also shows up, but it’s clearly people mocking a French accent
xerself, zerself, zirself

In the 2018 dataset, all are mixed between Legit Use and Hate/Irony (with higher numbers for the hateful uses)

In both datasets, these are the top three used as insults

Somewhere a sensible libtard is saying to xim/xerself,

"Simply having a majority in Congress isn't enough to pass everything you want unopposed, the founders were smart about checks and balances", their mind opens a little and in 2020 they are all MAGA.

In the 2019 dataset, Legit Use has backed off from xerself and zerself. Zirself still has one use.

All three of these retain the /r/ from her, suggesting that those using neopronouns as insults are also informed by misogyny.
In the 2018 dataset, this was the second-highest count for Legit Use, and no Hate/Irony

In the 2019 dataset, this is the clear leader, with *emself* having fallen off

However, the Hate/Irony is starting to creep into this form too

*Were Dr. Esmerelda attempting to obfuscate hir sincere motives in order to lull Feldspar into a complacent perspective wherein Synkrofksi, hirself, would have a realistic advantage over Esmerelda and, thereby, significant control of the cell, s/he was providing no evidence of it.*
Conclusions

*Themself* as a singular already has a foothold in the grammar, but no strong sense of a distinct identity.

Some neopronoun forms for reflexives overlap with other varieties of English, most notably *emself* which seems to have dropped off.

The compound-like nature of the English reflexive allows more room for creativity in the first morpheme, constructing multiple identities.

There seems to be a shifting turf war, with the forms retaining an /r/ more likely to be used as slurs.
Acknowledgements & References

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Gentry, Jeff. 2015. twitteR: R-based Twitter client. URL http://lists.hexdump.org/listinfo.cgi/twitter-users-hexdump.org


**erself and eself**

Similarly, *erself* is often just a dialectal truncation of *herself*.

As a part of a larger set of identity construction features, this shows up often in dog twitter.

*Eself* appears in Nigerian Pidgin English, along with third person pronoun *e*.
houself

Harry Potter slash fiction/roleplay.
merself

Underwater identity

Look at Crafty, scuba diving underwater, meeting his merself. #HappyTreeFriends #HTF #scubadiving #mermay