REPLY TO "REFLEXIVITY, ROLE CONFLICTS, AND THE MEANING OF ENGLISH SELF PRONOUNS"

PATRICK DUFFLEY

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5566-9076
Laval University
Department Languages, Linguistics and Translation
Quebec
Canada
Patrick.Duffley@lli.ulaval.ca

Abstract: Stern's Columbia School Theory contribution on English self-pronouns provides a wonderful illustration of the explanatory power of an approach that refuses to be taken in by a priori grammatical categories like reflexivity, which have the unfortunate consequence of giving the analyst the impression that he or she already knows all about the semantics of the form under study before looking at real usage, and attempts rather to uncover the semantic content of the linguistic sign -self based on careful observation and deep reflection on what might explain the way this sign is used in English. Stern shows that a purely syntactic account is unable to account for the fact that self-pronouns occur not only in syntactically reflexive environments, but also in non-reflexive ones, and

conversely that simple pronouns also appear in both types of contexts. A faint glimmer of the structuralist origins of Columbia School Theory shows through in one case however.

The contribution authored by Nancy Stern on English *self*-pronouns provides a wonderful illustration of the explanatory power of an approach that refuses to be taken in by *a priori*

grammatical categories like reflexivity, which have the unfortunate consequence of giving the

analyst the impression that he or she already knows all about the semantics of the form under study before looking at real usage, and attempts rather to uncover the semantic content of the linguistic sign -*self* based on careful observation and deep reflection on what might explain the way this sign is used in English. In addition, Stern shows that a purely syntactic account is unable to account for the fact that *self*-pronouns occur not only in syntactically reflexive environments, but also in non-reflexive ones, and conversely that simple pronouns also appear in both types of contexts. Only a meaning-based approach can handle such phenomena.

I accept Stern's clarification regarding Columbia School Theory that her analysis of *self*-pronouns shows that not all Columbia School studies divide up semantic domains in an exhaustive way. A faint glimmer of the structuralist origins of Columbia School Theory does show through in one case however. This occurs in the analysis of the common-case pronoun "me" in example (12), given as (1) below:

(1) Says Mitnick: "When I read about myself in the media, even I don't recognize

me."

Stern characterizes the reason for the use of this form of the pronoun in purely negative terms, as if it was in a binary opposition with the *self*-pronoun ("in the first, the meaning INSISTENCE is present, and in the second it is not"; "when he says "I don't recognize me", he is deliberately avoiding the meaning INSISTENCE to avoid the suggestion that he is playing two roles" (Stern, 2022, p. 104)). There is much more than just [-INSISTENCE] involved in the use of the pronoun "me" here. This form of the pronoun has a positive meaning that represents its referent in a quasi-substantival way, as can be seen from its use to constitute an independent utterence (2) and from its use as head of a noun phrase in which it receives adjectival modification (3):

(2) -Who let the dog in?
     - Me.

(3) What my wife wants is a new me.

What the speaker means in (1) is that when he reads depictions of himself in the media he does not recognize the person that he is, as a substantival entity with certain qualities. There is thus a positive reason for the choice of the common case form in this context, and not just the negative motivation of the avoidance of the notion of insistence.

In general, however, Stern's analyses are right on the mark. In the analysis of (10), given as (4) below, nevertheless, I wonder whether, besides the logophoric aspect of this use, according to which Bassam has the double role of cognizer and negated target of the case's

occurrence, there is also the notion of exclusion as a motivation for the use of the *self*-pronoun:

(4) Here she was again, Abir, multiple versions of her, yet always the same, his gone daughter. Someone touched his elbow. Congratulations, brother. A landmark. Can you believe it? He hung his head. It seemed that the case had happened to someone other than himself, someone out there hovering in a different world.

This use seems somewhat similar to the ones cited in the central section of Figure 1 as motivated by the intention of excluding other entities from the application of the predicate:

(5) You have to do your taxes, but you don't have to do your taxes yourself!

(6) But when [young men during the Vietnam War] burned their draft cards, no one died. Their protest affected themselves alone as sovereign individuals.

Another minor point concerns the analysis of (6) [= (7) below]:

(7) Three years ago, when her mother died unexpectedly of cancer, her coach found a new life in Canada, and she found herself alone.

Here the construction is not merely 'X finds Y', but rather the more complex construction with an object complement 'X finds Y ADJECTIVE', which conveys the meaning of discovering something/someone to be characterized by the quality denoted by the adjective. The explanation proposed

by Stern still works, because usually one discovers something other than oneself to be in a certain state/situation, and so discovering oneself to be alone is not the stereotypical scenario evoked by the object complement construction. But it is not quite exact to say that "the meaning of "find" suggests someone who does the finding, and something (or someone) that is found," (p. 98) as here what is evoked is not merely "find" but "find … alone".

A comment on the one unattested example proposed by Stern in (8) below [= (15) in the original] is in order:

(8) Then he entered test pilot training at Patuxent River, Md., elevating him into the elite of military aviation.

This example sounds extremely unnatural to my ear; it would be preferable to look for an attested case of this type, so as to avoid basing any conclusions on questionable data.

I noticed one awkward phrase that recurred a number of times in the text, notably in the heading of section 3: "unexpected messages". What the author means by this phrase is 'messages in which the *self*-pronoun's referent has a role that is unexpected.' (p. 97) It would be better to spell this out even though it requires a longer phrase, as it is not the message that is unexpected but the role played by the referent of the *self*-pronoun.

In conclusion, I was very happy to read an analysis which is solidly based on the semiological principle, according to which language is predicated on the correlation between stable meanings and stable forms, and

which recognizes the distinction between "meaning," i.e. linguistically encoded cognitive content, and "message," communicated notional content that includes both things that are linguistically encoded and things that are not. The failure to make this distinction is at the root of myriad problems in linguistic analysis. It comes down ultimately to a failure to recognize that some linguistic forms are stored in memory outside of the particular contexts in which they are deployed, as the potency which enables particular linguistic acts to be performed. This amnesia with respect to one of the basic principles put forward by the father of modern linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure is hard to understand. It is reassuring to see that the distinction between *langue* and *parole* is alive and well in Columbia School linguistics.

References

Stern, N. (2022), "Reflexivity, Role Conflicts, and The Meaning Of English Self Pronouns", *Manuscrito*, v. 45, n. 1, 90-116.