Patterns of unbound anaphors in a 'reality TV dialect'

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INTRODUCTION

- Standard English judgments typically find reflexive anaphors ungrammatical if not preceded, or bound, by a co-referential NP in the same clause (Chomsky 1981, Reinhart & Reuland 1993).
- However, such purportedly ungrammatical examples, like (1), are extremely common in at least reality TV show interviews:

  (1)   There are bigger targets in this house than Christie or **myself**.

- This study investigates whether such examples, taken from American reality TV (Survivor & Big Brother) interviews ('RTIs'), are accepted as grammatical in a broader context.

COMMON TYPES OF UNBOUND ANAPHORS

- Conjunctions: all sorts of pronoun/reflexive/NP combinations are regularly found in conjuncts, even outside RTIs.

  (2)   So Michie will put up **myself** and Tommy.

  (3)   I know that **myself** or Cliff is going to the jury.

- Objects of prepositions:

  (4)   That would be a serious issue for **myself**.

  (5)   Let's hear a little about Lauren from **herself**.

  (6)   I want to be empathetic to the people who are being cyberbullied like **myself**.

  (7)   The power of veto will be used on **myself**.

- Not all examples fit into those common categories:

  (8)   He did things time and time again that kept **himself** safe.

  (9)   There are several people in this room who owe Hayleigh an apology, including **myself**.

WHY REALITY TV?

- Reason 1: In competitive reality shows like Big Brother & Survivor, contestants are **living in a controlled environment** for many weeks, communicating with the same small group of people every day. People converge to some degree to match each other's language varieties, as shown by Harrington et al in Antarctica & to a lesser extent, Sonderegger et al in Big Brother UK.
- Reason 2: In competitive reality show interviews in particular, contestants are **playing to the audience and attempting to convey intelligence** & eloquence. Reflexive forms, like *myself*, may have a perception (at least among those contestants) of conveying those traits.

DO SPEAKERS ACCEPT RTI ANAPHORS?

- Despite the fact that such sentences are produced frequently, US English speakers rate the sentences as less acceptable than a more conventional alternative. 80 English-speaking US subjects recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk were presented with actual utterances from reality TV contexts, as well as identical counterparts with a pronoun (e.g. 'me' in place of 'myself'). Sentences were randomized and counterbalanced across conditions. Subjects overwhelmingly preferred the non-reflexive versions of the sentences ($p < .01$), but as ratings were on a 1-7 scale, both versions were rated relatively acceptable.

Sentence Type	Avg. Rating	St.Dev
Unbound Anaphor	5.52	.42
Pronoun	6.15	.38

Table 1: Acceptability ratings by sentence type

WHY ARE UNBOUND ANAPHORS ACCEPTED?

- Note that the majority of examples are first person anaphors ('myself'). The next most common are second person, and finally third person. Although this frequency distribution might be expected in interview contexts, the trend also correlates with acceptability ratings ($5.82 > 5.40 > 5.11$). This person hierarchy is not unique to anaphors, as similar trends frequently occur with pronouns:

  (10)   I like me.

  (11)   ?You like you.

  (12)   *He$_1$ likes him$_1$.

  Whichever syntactic theory of binding you use, it seems that exceptions are generally most common in first person.
- Previous research (Charnavel and Sportiche 2014) has considered some unbound anaphors to be *logophors*; that is, they are exempt from the binding condition, specifically if they occur in sentences where the subject must be animate or a perspective-taker. This generalization can account for several of the examples from RTIs, but not all of them.
- Reflexive anaphors might also be exempt from the binding condition when they are used as intensifiers ('I don't think it's a good idea, myself'), or focused prosodically. Again, this can account for some examples in RTIs, but not all of them.
- I propose that it is actually the relative markedness of unbound anaphors which leads to their use in RTIs: speakers associate them with **formality**.

REFLEXIVES = FORMAL?

- To test the idea that the reflexive form 'myself' is considered more formal than the pronouns 'I' or 'me', a follow-up was run on AMT that asked 80 speakers the forced-choice question: 'Which sounds more formal'? Speakers were presented with the randomized reflexive/pronoun pairs used in the acceptability judgment experiment. Indeed, the reflexive forms were chosen as 'more formal' 86% of the time.
- Of course, a binary judgment might be leading subjects to make a formality judgment they don't necessarily feel strongly about, so future work is needed. A more open experiment in the vein of Montgomery & Moore 2018, which allows for nonrestricted real-time reactions to speech variants, is in the works.

[1] Charnavel, I, and D Sportiche. "Anaphor binding: What French inanimate anaphors show." *Linguistic Inquiry* 47, no. 1 (2016): 35-87. [2] Chomsky, N. 1981. *Lectures on government and binding*. Walter de Gruyter. [3] Harrington, J, et al. "Phonetic change in an Antarctic winter." *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 146.5 (2019): 3327-3332. [4] Montgomery, C, and E Moore. "Evaluating S(c)illy voices: The effects of salience, stereotypes, and co-present language variables on real-time reactions to regional speech." *Language* 94, no. 3 (2018): 629-661. [5] Reinhart, T, & E Reuland. 1993. "Reflexivity". *Linguistic Inquiry* 24. 657-720. [6] Sonderegger, M, M Bane, and P Graff."The medium-term dynamics of accents on reality television." *Language* 93, no. 3 (2017): 598-640.