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I Like Both Myself and Me

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The reflexive nature of pronouns varies with person, but only in the first person does the subject always co-identify with the object, Thus I like me has effectively the same meaning as I like myself Grammatically, I like myself is considered marked, while I like me is unmarked. However, is the unmarked form the most used?

This exercise started as a search for occurrences of *I like myself* and *I like me* on the Internet, to identify simple frequencies of use. It emerged as an issue from the back-to-back LAGB and BAAL conferences at Reading during September 2001, where the issue of reflexivity was dealt with directly or indirectly by several presenters. In the "Pragmatics and Anaphora" workshop at the LAGB conference, Yan Huang presented a paper on *Anaphora, Syntax and neo-Gricean pragmatics* (Huang, 2001), and Anne Zribi-Hertz presented on *Reflexivity and Disjoint Reference: Where Does Syntax Begin?* (Zribi-Hertz, 2001). Both of these papers concentrated on the issue of reflexivity in language use, and both used the syntactic definition of marked and unmarked forms: in the case of English, a marked reflexive has *-self* added to the object. Also, during his talk at the BAAL conference Eddie Williams mentioned, in passing, that a business reflexive seemed to have arisen as an emphatic (e.g. *you can write to ourselves at the above address...*). He saw this as a phatic attempt to add authority (Williams, 2001).

One question posed at the workshop was whether the grammatically marked form was actually the most frequently used form and, if it was, whether it was really the unmarked form. This question appeared to be easily answerable by reference to corpora, and the largest corpus of all, the Internet, seemed ideal to test the question.

Using the Internet as a corpus has both advantages and disadvantages. It has the two great advantages of being enormous and of being unselfconscious – there appears to be little or no self-censorship, so syntactic forms encountered can be viewed as grammatical at least at the point of origin (the *I-language* level). However, any study using the Internet has to take into account certain problems.

The first is that the Internet is homogeneous: first language and other language usage are difficult to separate, and there is no way of knowing the age of the writer or the time when the material was written. It can therefore only be used for the grosser type of study, where simple headcounts are significant.

The second problem is identifying the most suitable search engine. When this project began, in 2001, Alta Vista was the only viable choice. It provided a search of whole pages instead of just a header or keyword search; it allowed for phrase searches; it recognised spaces; and it was regularly updated. For precisely these same reasons the best choices would now be Google or AOL; Alta Vista is not now as specific as these leading search engines. However, as the first studies were made using Alta Vista, all subsequent studies also used it. This was done to ensure, as far as possible, comparable values.

The search itself is problematic: limitations to the Internet search engines have to be taken into account. First, most engines do not recognise punctuation or capital letters, so a search for *I like myself* would also find "these are the things my husband and I like. Myself, I also like…". Second, the string to be found must be enclosed in spaces and double quotes. Without the double quotes the selection will include any site with any one of the words.

Without the spaces the search will pick up partial strings, so that a search for I like me would also find "I like meat" or even "Ferengi like meat".

The final problem is that the Internet is constantly changing, so some of the sites listed by search engines no longer exist or have been altered. What is being sampled is, therefore, a smeared image of what actually exists, and not a snapshot.

It is still possible to get useful data out of the exercise if these limitations are taken into account. Two facts have to be acknowledged: first, the absolute values produced for frequency utterance cannot be considered individually mathematically accurate; and second, some anomalies are bound to survive the checking process. To resolve this problem each case can be checked in detail, but this is impractical with large hit counts. Fortunately, with large hit counts any anomalies are evenly distributed through the data, so the values are accurate enough for comparative analysis. In this exercise the values mostly represent high-volume data, so statistical anomalies will tend to be smoothed out. However, this difficulty does mean that any volumes under about 100 cannot be considered as statistically relevant. In this exercise several totals under 100 were found: they are included for completeness but cannot be considered useful data.

It was originally intended to look at the full range of reflexive pronouns, but this proved impossible because the reflexive nature of pronouns varies with person. In the third person there is the probability that the subject is not co-identified with the object, so that, in *he likes him*, the subject *he* is unlikely to be the same person as the object *him*. Reflexion has to be marked by a syntactic flag, the addition of *–self*. In the second person, it is possible to either separately identify individuals in a receiver-group, or to redefine the receiver in the middle of an utterance. Thus *you like you* can, through deixis, have a different meaning to *you like yourself*.

Only in the first person does the subject always co-identify with the object: *I like me* has effectively the same meaning as *I like myself*. In the plural there is the slight possibility that *we like us* could refer to two different groups containing the sender, but in the examples checked no cases were found where this meaning could be imputed.

The first data check in September 2001 proved that *I like me* is more common than *I like myself*. The study was extended to look at the past tense, the plural and the comparable antithetical statement *I hate me / myself* and this immediately uncovered an anomaly: in none of the cases, except *I like me*, was the grammatically unmarked form in the majority. The most extreme case (plural, other tense and antithetical meaning — *we hated us / ourselves*) was, unfortunately, statistically insignificant — even the Internet is not a big enough corpus — but the less extreme cases (plural or other tense or antithetical meaning) seemed to show that changing just a single feature affected the relative frequencies of the grammatically marked and unmarked forms.

In February 2002 a second check was carried out, this time extending the study to include semantically related forms of *love*, *dislike*, *don 't like* and *do not like*. This gave a theoretical continuum of meaning — although, it must be stressed, this continuum is not mathematically significant. This time the tense effect was not tested. The second check showed the same effect as the first, and gave the additional piece of data that semantic "distance" from *I like me / myself* (using a scale of love = 1, like = 2, dislike / don't like / do not like = 3, hate = 4) seemed to affect relative frequencies.

In December 2002 a third check was performed, combining the features of the first and second checks. The variations were: singular and plural, present tense and past, and the same continuum of meaning as used in the second check. This gave twenty-four binomial sets of data (figure 1). Once again, the same effects were found as in the first two checks: changing verb, tense or number reduced the frequency of the grammatically unmarked form, and changing verb and tense, or number and tense, had a cumulative effect. Once again, changing verb, tense and number gave a statistically insignificant sample.

Figure 1 – December 2002 data

					Total	**Unmarked %**	**Predicted**	**Variance**
						Figure 2		*Figure 3*
1		**Me**	**Myself**					
2	love	6075	7129		13204	46.00	46.00	0.00
3	like	4255	3218		7473	56.93	56.93	0.00
4	do not like	66	84		150	44.00	44.00	0.00
5	don't like	227	881		1108	20.48	20.48	0.00
6	dislike	16	87		103	15.53	15.53	0.00
7	hate	1046	13363		14409	7.25	7.25	0.00
8		**Me**	**Myself**					
9	I loved	148	728		876	16.89	20.79	-3.90
10	I liked	145	329		474	30.59	25.73	4.86
11	I did not like	9	53		62	14.51	19.89	-5.38
12	I didn't like	74	487		561	13.19	9.26	3.93

					Total	**Unmarked %**	**Predicted**	**Variance**
						Figure 2		*Figure 3*
13	I disliked	4	58		62	6.45	7.02	-0.57
14	I hated	139	4333		4472	3.10	3.28	-0.18
15		**Us**	**Ourselves**	**Ourself**				
16	We love	811	4737	146	5694	14.24	14.72	-0.48
17	We like	119	386	3	508	23.42	18.22	5.20
18	We do not like	1	35	0	36	2.77	14.08	-11.31
19	We don't like	6	178	1	185	3.24	6.55	-3.31
20	We dislike	2	30	0	32	6.25	4.97	1.28
21	We hate	27	603	3	633	4.26	2.32	1.94
22		**Us**	**Ourselves**	**Ourself**				
23	We loved	14	79	1	94	14.89	17.16	-2.27
24	We liked	4	19	0	23	17.39	21.23	-3.84
25	We did not like	0	0	0	0	0.00	16.41	-16.41
26	We didn't like	2	14	0	16	12.50	7.64	4.86
27	We disliked	2	5	0	7	28.57	5.79	22.78
28	We hated	2	49	0	51	3.92	2.70	1.22

The values for the third check are expressed graphically in figures 2 and 3. The graphs show four series of data, where the numbers on the x axis correspond to the row numbers in figure 1. The series of data correspond to rows 2 to 7, 9 to 14, 16 to 21 and 23 to 28. In figure 2 the data seem to show two of the four sets as almost-perfect series of Poisson distribution. This is an artefact of the data: the points in the series are arbitrary and do not represent a mathematical relationship. If there is any scalar distance between the x axis points, then the distance between *I love me* and *I like me* is not comparable to the distance between *I do not like me* and *I don't like me*. Because of this, the data should be treated mathematically as twenty-four binomial distributions between grammatically marked and unmarked forms. Mathematically, the binomial distributions are not comparable; but linguistically, they are. This gives a problem for analysing the data: if we insist on a mathematically rigorous analysis then the results we can produce are banal. If, however, we attempt a more free-form analysis

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then our conclusions will have to be more tentative. The second option was selected as likely to be the most productive.

Figure 2 – Grammatically unmarked forms as percentages of all forms

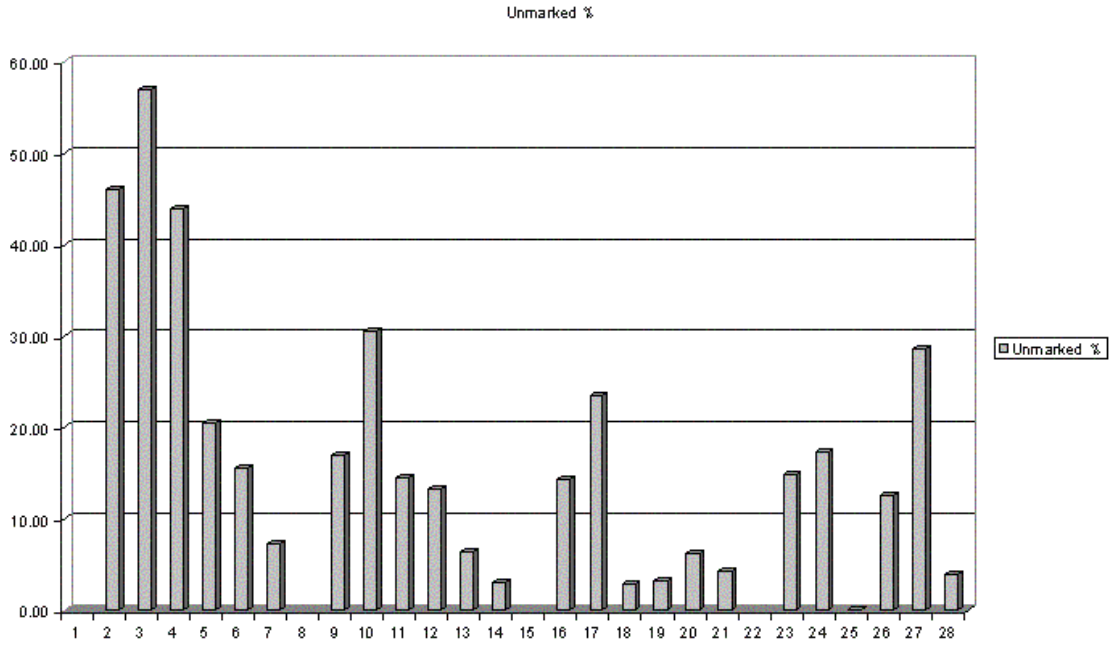
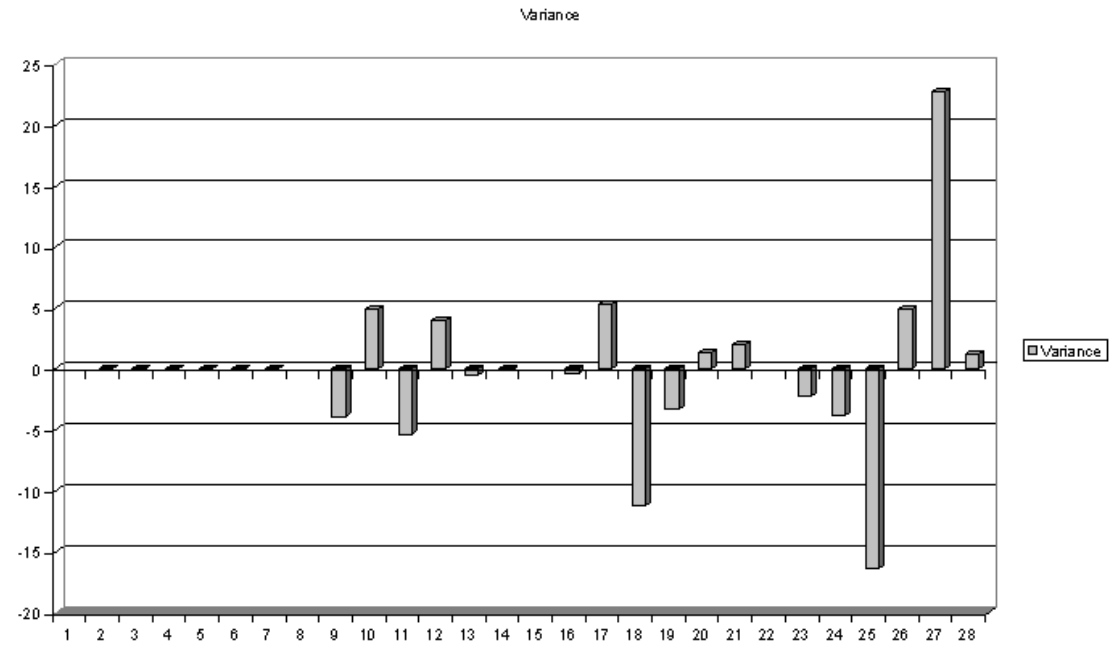


Figure 3 – Variance between grammatically unmarked % and predicted values based on Figure 1, lines 2 to 7



It was first necessary to try to normalise the data. To do this, the first series (singular present tense) was used as the base. This decision was made on the basis that the singular present tense was the largest set, containing the utterances that were the origin of the exercise. It thus provides a reasonable baseline. The

second task was to predict the outcomes of the other sets of data based on the first, baseline set. The values in the *figure 1 predicted* column show the distribution that would have occurred if the only variable had been the continuum of meaning, while figure 3 shows the variation between the predicted column and the actual (unmarked %) column. In this graph we can see that the first form, *love*, and the total of the third to fifth forms (*do not / don 't / dis- like*) have notable negative values compared to the positive value of the second, base form, *like*. There do appear to be separate effects from verb, tense and number which cumulatively and negatively affect the frequency of the unmarked form. It can also be seen that the data in the fourth series (other tense / other person) is highly

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variable compared to the first three series. This is caused by the low total values in this series, and serves to emphasise the unreliability of this data.

What could be going on here? Using a functionalist analysis the effects could be described as a product of the textual metafunction, or possibly connected with the logical metafunction. The frequency variation between utterances could be a feature of the utterances themselves, or it could be a matter of the contexts in which they are found.

The logical metafunction is concerned with context and the relationship between utterances rather than the utterances themselves. It is associated with such terms as holism and idiom, inasmuch as all three express, at some level, the use of an utterance as a stand-alone agrammatical form. Although there may be apparent grammar operating within the utterance, the production can be considered as unitary – what Alison Wray calls in another context "performance without competence" (Wray, 2002), This was also the subject of a survey carried out as part of my own MA (Edwardes, 2001), which showed that the same utterance can be viewed in different ways by different individuals, so that what is for some an idiomatic unit is for others a grammatical composite. What is more, there seemed to be variation among individuals, between a tendency to view utterances in an idiomatic way and a tendency to view them in a grammatical way: some people adopted a grammatical approach when it seemed inappropriate, and some adopted an idiomatic approach when that seemed inappropriate. The idiomatic nature of an utterance does not appear to be a grammatical or even cultural absolute.

If *I like me* is being used as an idiom, what we may be seeing is a "contamination" from the idiomatic form *I like me* into related forms. As the distance from the original utterance increases, so the idiomatic contamination is reduced; willingness to use the idiomatic form reduces as the influence of the idiom wanes. This explanation fits the facts, and may well be a partial solution. However; it is unsatisfying as a full solution in that it does not include any context-related data.

To address this, the first 100 occurrences of *I like me* and *I like myself* were investigated to see whether the context revealed an intentional difference in usage and meaning. Of the 100 *I like me* occurrences, 79 were complete utterances related to self-help products; 12 occurrences were complete utterances

unrelated to self-help; 7 were embedded in larger utterances (e.g. *I like me best with a beard*); one was a dialect replacement for *my* (*I like me sex on the sharp side*); and one was elliptical (*I like me some Chris Moore*).

Of the 100 *I like myself* occurrences, only 6 were related to self-help products, and 64 were complete utterances unrelated to self-help; 26 were embedded in larger utterances (e.g. *I like myself at this weight*) and 4 were emphatics (e.g. *it's what I like myself*). Surprisingly, 45 were related to the personal weight of the writer, compared to zero for *I like me*.

Thus there seem to be pragmatic issues involved alongside the idiomatic issue, at least around the *I like me / myself* dichotomy. Could there actually be a subtle difference in meaning between the two forms? Anthony Giddens (1991) points towards issues of self which are related to the intimate self and a reified external self, I can see *me* as a single entity, with the reflexion back to that single entity, or I can see *myself* as two entities, with the reflexion moving from one version of me to the other. There are further complexities: the intimate me is related to the intellectual me, the me that drives the machine; while the external myself is related to the physical myself, the machine that is driven. This philosophical division of the self has a long pedigree, from Descartes' self-who-thinks proving the self-who-is (1644), to Bruner's self-as-story-narrator and self-as-story-protagonist (Bruner, 1990). In terms of this analysis of *me* and *myself*, the data do seem to indicate an intellectual *me* who can be liked or disliked; and a physical *myself* who can be weighed, changed and reweighed. It can be argued that the grammatically marked and unmarked cases of *I like...* satisfy different pragmatic discourse needs.

If this argument has merit, it should be possible to prove it by looking at the other utterances in the data collected. When this is done the conclusions do seem to apply to many

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other cases, although not to all of them. *I hate me* seems to involve the same concentration on the intimate self as does *I like me*. *I hate myself* is similarly biased towards the external self. However, the plural forms (e.g. *we like us / ourselves*) are complicated by the fact that the plural can be a loose group of individuals or a "corporate" entity. While the corporate entity does seem to have a similarity to the singular form intimate self (*me*), it is complicated by the intended audience for the group identification. If the corporate entity is being identified for an external audience then a single entity seems to be promoted, and the form *we like us* tends to be used. For a group of individuals or a corporate entity identified for an internal audience, *we like ourselves* tends to be used. In addition, interpretation of the data proved problematic: while in some cases the meaning was clear, in others it was not.

What can be concluded from this analysis of marked and unmarked forms? The main outcome seems to be that what, at first sight, looked a simple question has turned out to involve a range of issues. What should have been a straightforward grammatical exercise has become mixed with idiom and the semantics of self to make a complex interpretative problem. This is an illustration of the difficulties that surround

corpus examinations: to produce a list of frequencies for different constructions is banal, but the data as a whole resist any single interpretation.

If the data are being read correctly, the conclusion seems to be that a large part of the use of the unmarked utterance *I like me* is a product of idiom. However, as the related forms become more semantically distant from this exemplar utterance, the more contextual effects come into play. *I like me* is mainly used because it is idiomatic; *we hate us* is mainly used because it has a usefully different meaning to *we hate ourselves*.

The function of statistics is to use known vectors in the data to discover or prove other vectors. In this case, the discrete binomial vector of grammatically marked and unmarked forms has been analysed in relation to the discrete vectors of verb meaning, tense and number to try to identify the effect of the continuous vector of idiom. However, it has been found that the utterances analysed also encode an important differentiation between the intimate self and a self that can be viewed as someone else. This has affected the strict numerical analysis based on the vectors chosen. Untangling the effect of these selves from the vectors is not simple and work remains to be done; but the principle, that markedness is not isolable purely on the basis of grammar, appears to be proved.

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