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Table of Contents

iv	Staff
v	About Schwa
vii	Editor's Note
1	A Preference for Pretense: Reader Bias in Evaluating Writing <i>Wendy Jennings</i>
9	Clauses of Worship: An Analysis of Clausal Complexity in Old and Modern Hymns <i>Beau McMurray</i>
15	The Developments of the Reflexive Pronoun <i>Themselves</i> <i>Kennadie Halliday</i>
23	Beowulf and Litotes: A Pragmatic Approach <i>Alexander Christensen</i>
33	Using Directness with Grace <i>Rachel Hulet</i>
43	Language Sculpts Perception: How Language Makes You Human <i>Julia Hope Evans</i>
51	Men? Women? Different? Well, What a Surprise: A Literature Review of Gender and Sarcasm <i>Kaytee Johnson</i>

The Developments of the Singular Reflexive Pronoun *Themself*

Kennadie Halliday

*This article investigates the properties, rules, and features of reflexive pronouns, with a special interest in the topic of the singular reflexive pronoun *themself* (corresponding to the singular *they*). The author researched usage dictionaries, English corpora, and contemporary media examples to analyze current trends in and opinions of the usage of *themself*. Although *themself* is currently considered improper usage, it will likely become increasingly common over coming years and—in accordance with the recently standardized singular *they* pronoun—will inevitably become a standard form of English.*

Introduction

As many have noted in recent months of 2020, we as a global community are witnessing history in the making. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds, people are contemplating how the world might change; we might see the end of handshakes, cash, and public touch screens, and the introduction of masks and gloves into our everyday wardrobes. However, as someone who studies linguistics, I have witnessed another historical change: the standardization of the singular *they/them* pronoun. This change is significant because the English language very rarely sees a change in personal pronouns. When Merriam-Webster's Dictionary and the American Psychological Association (APA) accepted the singular *they*, I wondered how this shift would affect the reflexive form of *they*. Would *themselves* become acceptable as well? This question piqued my interest in reflexive pronouns in general, and I set out to understand this intriguing topic of grammar.

Reference Grammar

In order to investigate this matter, I first turned to *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage*, a usage dictionary authored by Pam Peters, a linguistics professor at Macquarie University. Peters explains that reflexive pronouns “typically refer back to the subject of the sentence” and can serve multiple functions (2004, p. 465). They can operate as the object of a preposition or verb (“He hurt himself.”), they can be used to add emphasis to the antecedent (“I met the president himself.”), or they can replace regular pronouns (“Sarah and myself went to the park.”) (Peters, 2004, p. 465–466). Reflexive pronouns must agree with the antecedent in person and number. Peters (2004) also discusses the issue of the reflexive pronoun *themselves*, pointing out that it was considered standard English until the sixteenth century (p. 536). She argues that the singular reflexive pronoun *themselves* is useful in referring to indefinite pronouns or the singular pronoun *they*. In addition, it is not a gendered pronoun, which makes it a more concise and inclusive usage (a usage that does not exclude or discriminate against individuals based on gender) than the standard *himself*, or *himself* or *herself*. Though Peters (2004) acknowledges that the usage of *themselves* is not currently considered standard English, she insists that “it’s time to reinstate it to the set of reflexive pronouns” (p. 536).

Corpus Examples

Next, I turned to English corpora to further investigate reflexive pronouns. The corpora revealed several interesting details about their nature and history. First, I looked into reflexive pronouns that refer to the personal pronoun *they*—primarily *themselves*, *themselves*, *himself*, and *himself* or *herself*. According to the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), in the period of 2000–2009, the frequency of reflexive pronouns that refer to the antecedent *them* (per million words) is as







follows: 175.46/mil for *themselves*, 379.20/mil for *himself*, 0.44/mil for *himself or herself* and 0.10/mil for *themselves* (Davies, 2010–).

This research also revealed several interesting trends in the use of reflexive pronouns over time. For example, according to the COHA, the use of *themselves* has been decreasing since 1830, with the usage per million words falling from 424.04 to 175.46 as of 2009. The use of the phrase *himself or herself* has risen, highlighting the increased societal focus on sexist language over time. According to the Contemporary Corpus of American English (COCA), the use of *themselves* is currently on the rise, more than doubling in frequency per million words between 2000 and 2019 (Davies, 2008–). This upward trend is likely due to the standardization of the singular *they*. Inversely, *themselves* is decreasing in frequency, dropping from 177.26/mil to 117.08/mil over the same period. The inverse trends of *themselves* and *themselves* are illustrated in the COCA charts below (Davies, 2008–).

Chart A: *Themselves*

1990-1994	24,650	139.1	177.26	
1995-1999	23,158	147.8	156.71	
2000-2004	22,517	146.6	153.63	
2005-2009	20,826	144.9	143.68	
2010-2014	18,636	145.3	128.29	
2015-2019	16,946	144.7	117.08	

Chart B: *Themselves*

1990-1994	35	139.1	0.25	
1995-1999	37	147.8	0.25	
2000-2004	21	146.6	0.14	
2005-2009	22	144.9	0.15	
2010-2014	24	145.3	0.17	
2015-2019	45	144.7	0.31	

Furthermore, when I looked into the context of these usages, I found that *themselves* is an informal usage most commonly found in blogs and spoken English (0.93/mil and 0.73/mil, respectively), while it is almost never found in academic writing (0.06/mil) (Davies, 2008–). For example, in the COHA, the frequency of *themselves* spikes in the year 1910, when Ring Lardner’s *The Real Dope* was published (Davies, 2010–). This book used informal usages, much like the writings of Mark Twain. In one excerpt, Lardner writes, “Well Al I suppose it is kind of foolish to be writeing you a letter now when they won’t be no chance to mail it till we get across the old pond but still and all a man has got to do something to keep *themselves* busy” (1919, p. 1; italics added). All of the examples of *themselves* in the years 1910–1919 come from this piece of fiction. Meanwhile, *themselves* is a formal usage found most commonly in academic writing (287.69/mil) (Davies 2008–).

I then discovered that reflexive pronouns are most commonly found in fiction, likely because reflexive pronouns emphasize the individual, and fiction by nature focuses highly on individuals (Davies, 2008–). For example, *himself* and *herself* occur in fiction at a frequency of 576.09/mil and 423.27/mil, respectively, whereas they occur at a frequency of 139.13/mil and 46.20/mil in academic writing. The latter trend also demonstrates the use of *himself* in reference to the generic pronoun *he*.

My research also revealed that pronouns do not typically change drastically over time. Over the period of 1990–2019, the frequency of *myself* remained steady, only changing from 146.10/mil to 139.60/mil over three decades (Davies, 2008–). Similarly, the frequency of *herself* only shifted from 99.06/mil to 100.44/mil over the same period. Interestingly, the use of *himself* decreased from 229.92/mil to 192.92/mil in that period, suggesting that the use of the generic *he* has become less acceptable.

Shifts in accordance with standards on sexist language are further demonstrated by data in the COHA regarding reflexive pronouns. Looking at the period between 1960 and 2010, one can see how the feminist movement impacted American English. During that period, the frequency of *himself* decreased from 616.29/mil (more than triple the frequency of *herself*) to 379.20/mil (only 1.5 times more frequent than *herself*) (Davies, 2010–). The usage of *herself* has increased in frequency from 171.58/mil to 253.45/mil. In addition, the phrase *himself or herself* was introduced as a form of inclusive language, increasing in frequency from a meager 0.04/mil in 1960 to 0.44/mil by 2010, becoming eleven times more common.

Media Examples

My prior research revealed that personal pronouns very rarely change. However, the pronoun *they* has recently undergone a shift. Within the last year, using *they* as a singular personal pronoun has been recognized by sources such as APA and *Merriam-Webster* as a standard English usage. Logically, the singular reflexive pronoun *themself* will likely also become standard. Thus, when searching for media examples of my construction, I focused on the use of *themself* in today's media.

I found the usage of *themself* frequently on social media formats. This occurrence patterns accordingly with the data from the COCA, which states that *themself* is found commonly in blogs and informal writing (Davies, 2008–). For example, I saw the use of *themself* in a blog post, which reads, “Someone who’s chaotic good (me) should never be allowed to run a bakery by *themself* (my job)” (@automaticfave, 2018). Although this example is in an informal setting, it still demonstrates that *themself* is becoming a more standard usage. In the example from the 1919 book *The Real Dope*, Lardner used *themself* to make the narrator sound uneducated. However, in this example from a blog

post we see *themselves* being used with a more educated, grammar-conscious voice. Furthermore, the use of *themselves* in the blog post highlights the fact that the subject is alone; the phrase *by themselves* would have sounded somewhat contradictory, especially when coordinating with the singular pronoun *someone*.

I also found multiple examples of *themselves* being used in recent, relevant news. I observed that most of these examples were actually spoken English in the form of quotes. For example, one article quotes Kelsey Singer, a graduate from the University of North Carolina, saying, “People are forced to put themselves in unhealthy and dangerous situations regarding the virus” (Berg, 2020, para. 8). In this example, using *themselves* highlights that people are individually—as opposed to collectively—experiencing “unhealthy and dangerous situations.” In another article, New York City’s Transit Authority Interim President, Sarah Feinberg, is quoted as saying, “People have to be very vigilant about mask usage and putting as much space between themselves and others as they can” (Layne & Goldberg, 2020, para. 9). Even though these examples are taken from spoken English, like the blog example, they illustrate that *themselves* is now considered a more acceptable and educated English usage. These examples also demonstrate how useful the singular reflexive pronoun *themselves* is. By using *themselves* instead of *themselves*, the speakers stress the fact that an action is being performed by an individual, whereas using *themselves* might cause confusion.

The final example of *themselves* that I found in the media was interesting for two reasons: it was written, not spoken, and it was located in an article published by the United States Army. Unlike all of the prior examples, this example occurs in formal, written English. The article reads, “From there, the medics instructed on how to collect the sample themselves” (Getsie, 2020, para. 6). While this usage may seem like a careless mistake, within the context of the article it clarifies the meaning of the reflexive pronoun. “Themselves” refers to the patients whom the medics are instructing. It clarifies that “themselves” does not refer to the medics, and the usage also adds emphasis to the fact that the patients are collecting samples on their own.

Conclusion

I foresee that *themselves* will soon be recognized as a standard English usage, in accordance with the standardization of the singular pronoun *they*. Reflexive pronouns must agree with the antecedent in person and number, so the only logical reflexive pronoun to accompany the singular *they* is *themselves*. Furthermore, *themselves* is an incredibly useful term because it is gender neutral and, as contemporary examples have shown, it stresses that an action is done by a single individual. However, *themselves* is currently still considered an informal or uneducated usage (Peters, 2004, p. 536). That may change soon, but in the meantime one should be careful not to use *themselves* in formal writing. Unfortunately, I would not advise using the term *themselves* when referring to the singular *they* either, as it does not

follow the rule that reflexive pronouns must agree with the antecedent in number. Thus, during this time of shift in standard usage, it seems there is a gap in the reflexive pronouns. I hope *themselves* fills that gap, and soon. Once it does, I would fully encourage speakers and writers alike to embrace this beneficial usage.

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