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Push comes to drag: the reflexive
replacement in English

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Many Germanic languages mark reflexivization in the third person by means of a special pronoun: Old High German sih (whence Modern German sich), Old Norse sik, Gothic sik, etc.¹ Presumably, these descend from a pronoun, call it *sik, which served this function in Proto-Germanic. This pronoun makes no appearance whatever in the history of English, Frisian, and Old Saxon. In modern English, the function of marking reflexive coreference has been taken over by the compound pronouns of the himself type. But Pre-English must have had a reflex of the old pronoun *sik at one time. In this paper I will speculate on the mechanism by means of which English lost this simple pronoun and replaced it with the compound pronoun.

Marking intra-clause coreference is a function definable independently of any particular syntactic strategy. Thus, what we want to investigate is the loss of one strategy and its replacement by another of comparable function. The terms push-chain and drag-chain, originally introduced into the study of diachronic phonology by Martinet, can be adapted to the analysis of this replacement. A possible claim is that the himself reflexive somehow came into being to mark reflexive coreference, and that the *sik reflexive, being now redundant and hence pulling no functional weight of its own, withered away. This could be described as a push-chain, in the sense that the independent development of the compound pronoun pushed the simple pronoun into functional redundancy and then oblivion. Alternatively, we could claim that for some reason the *sik reflexive began to be dropped, leaving the function of reflexive coreference unexpressed. The himself reflexive was then developed to fill the need. This would be a drag-chain.² Can we tell which of these processes is responsible for the reflexive replacement in English?

Since there are no written records documenting any stage of English in which the pronoun *sik was still present, our method must be necessarily indirect and inferential. We will search for other languages for which a similar process of the replacement of one reflexive strategy by another can be documented. To clarify the nature of the process we are looking for, I will first summarize a few facts about reflexive

strategies in general.

Subject-object coreference can be marked either by intransitivizing the verb⁷ or by using a special NP-filler as object. Clearly, both the defunct *sik and the current himself are of the NP-filler type. It happens that reflexives of this type universally cluster into two subcategories, the characteristics of which are summarized in (1):

- | | | | |
|--------|-----------------------------|--|--|
| (1)(a) | Morphology: | Simple pronoun | Compound NP |
| (b) | Antecedent NP: | Must be subject | Need not be subject |
| (c) | Occurrence in oblique NP's: | Must occur in all oblique NP's in the clause | Does not occur in certain oblique NP's |

The compound forms consist at least of a morpheme specifically denoting reflexivization and a separate pronominal element. See Faltz 1976b for a discussion and justification of this typology.

Now, *sik and himself exemplify the two subclasses. Thus, himself pronouns are compound forms all having in common the morpheme self to mark reflexivization. The antecedent need not be a subject, since

- (2) John_i talked to Bill_j about himself_{i/j}

is ambiguous, and

- (3) I talked to Bill_i about himself_i

is possible. And himself is not normally used in certain oblique NP's, such as the one illustrated in (4):

- (4) John_i saw a snake near him_{i/j}

even when that NP is coreferent with the subject of its clause.

That *sik belonged to the other subclass is seen by looking at its modern descendents, such as German sich. Clearly sich is not morphologically a compound. It requires its antecedent to be a subject, so that

- (5) Hans_i sprach mit Fritz_j über sich_{i/*j}
 ("Hans talked to Fritz about himself")

is unambiguous. And it must appear in all oblique NP positions when coreference with the subject of the clause is intended, so that German has two equivalents

of (4), strictly controlled by the reference:

- (6) Hans_i sah eine Schlange neben $\begin{cases} \text{sich}_{i/*j} \\ \text{ihm}_{*i/j} \end{cases}$

Other descendants of *sik exhibit this kind of syntax as well. We assume that this common syntax reflects the situation in Proto-Germanic, making *sik a typical example of a simple reflexive pronoun.

We can therefore specify the English reflexive replacement more narrowly: a simple pronoun reflexive was replaced by a compound reflexive. For the rest of the paper we restrict our attention to cases of this sort.

Now, languages exist in which simple and compound reflexives coexist, a fact which suggests that replacement of one by the other is in progress. One such language is Spanish.⁵ There is a strategy in Spanish which consists of placing the word mismo after an NP. Apparently, this was done originally to signify emphatic attention to the identity of the referent of that NP. However, in certain oblique positions, it has become virtually obligatory when that NP is a pronoun coreferent with another NP in the same clause, as in (7):

- (7) Juan_i le habló a María_j de sí_i $\begin{cases} \text{mismo} \\ \text{?}\emptyset \end{cases}$
 ("Juan spoke to Maria about himself.")

In (7), sí is already a reflexive pronoun. Analogous to Germanic *sik, it appears in the third person only, and requires its antecedent to be a subject. In (7), however, the mismo strategy must also be used, at least in the colloquial style of my informant's dialect. It clearly belongs to the same subclass of reflexive marking that himself does. Morphologically, the resultant NP is a compound form with the fixed morpheme mism- indicating reflexivization. The antecedent is not required to be a subject:

- (8) Juan_i le habló a María_j de ella_j misma
 ("Juan spoke to Maria about herself.")

Finally, mismo is not normally used in certain oblique NP positions, such as the one shown in (4) for English; but we will examine the Spanish for this in a moment.

Sentence (7) illustrates that two reflexive strategies, one from each subclass of NP-filler reflexives, exist in Spanish. But more than that, (7) illustrates

a syntactic context in which the two strategies have applied simultaneously to indicate a single piece of coreference. Such an overlapping context suggests that we are witnessing a push-chain in progress. To determine the direction of the shift, note that the two strategies are not equally weighed. Colloquially, mismo is required in (7), but the reflexive pronoun sí can be replaced by the ordinary nonreflexive él:

- (9) Juan_i le habló a María_j de él_i mismo

Thus, in the context illustrated by these sentences, the mismo strategy is more central to the expression of reflexive coreference than the sí strategy. Clearly, the reverse must have been true earlier; for we know that in Latin times the primary and probably the only expression of the reflexive was the ancestor pronoun of sí, and that this pronoun was obligatory. In fact, the Latin situation was analogous to the one in contemporary German. Therefore, it would appear that in Spanish we have an example of an ongoing push-chain in which a compound strategy (mismo) is ousting a simple pronoun strategy (sí).

In French, a similar process may be seen to have occurred. The ouster of the simple reflexive pronoun has gone farther, though. The French equivalent of (7) would be, in the current language:

- (10) Jean_i a parlé à Marie de { lui-même;
 ? *soi(-même)

the simple reflexive soi being relegated, in oblique NP's, to contexts of coreference with an unspecified subject (and certain other special cases) such as

- (11) On veut toujours parler de soi
 ("One always wants to talk about oneself.")

We can imagine this process continuing still further. The simple reflexive pronoun in French and Spanish might be eliminated entirely if and/or when the compound pronouns take over in all syntactic positions. We would guess on the basis of what we have seen so far in French and Spanish that this is just what happened in English; that is, the suffixation of self became a reflexive strategy which completely pushed *sik out of existence.

However, closer examination of French and Spanish reveals a serious difficulty with the idea that a push-chain is in progress. Namely, there are NP's in which neither the simple reflexive pronoun nor the compound pronoun are used, even though that NP is coreferent with the subject of its clause. The Spanish equivalent of (4) is a case in point:

(12) Juan_i vio una culebra cerca de él_{i/j}

A parallel example can be constructed for French:

(13) Jean_i a vu un serpent près de lui_{i/j}

Another French example is

(14) Jean_i est monté chez lui_{i/j}
("John went up to his place.")

The use of mismo or même in (12) - (14) is not ungrammatical, merely unreflexive. In these cases, the original function of these words reappears: they are used when the speaker wishes to particularly emphasize the identity of the referent. That they do not function as reflexive markers here is not surprising, since we expect compound reflexives not to appear in all oblique NP's (see (1c)). But the absence of the simple reflexive pronoun sí or soi is problematic. Recall that such reflexives typically are required in all oblique NP's of a clause when coreferent to the subject, as illustrated in (6) for German. Yet the corresponding pronouns have been dropped in Spanish and French in the oblique positions illustrated above. This cannot have been due to a push-effect from the mismo/même strategy, since these latter do not appear as reflexives in these positions at all. Thus, the problem raised by sentences (12) - (14) has two aspects: (a) a universal of reflexive-type is violated, and (b) the simple pronoun disappeared without being pushed.

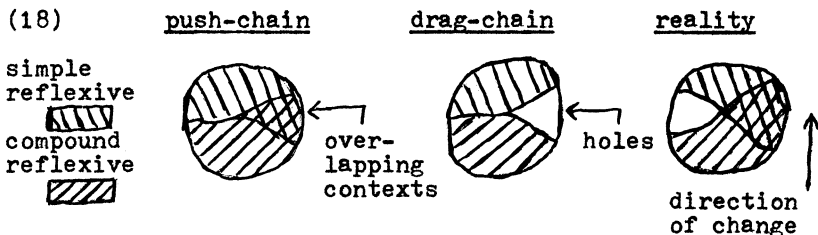
The one clear piece of evidence furnished by Old English data is that functional holes such as were illustrated for Romance in (12) - (14) existed in English as well, and in an even bigger way. Namely, the simple reflexive pronoun has already been lost entirely; yet, the strategy which is to replace it (the suffixation of self to the ordinary pronoun) has not yet taken up full residence in the grammar. The new strategy is either optional or else controlled by unclear conditions, even

in the case of coreference between subject and direct object:

- (15) ic me (selfne) claensie "I purify myself."
 (16) hie forseodh hie (selfe) "They scorn themselves."
 (17) eadmodgiadh eow (selfe) "Humble yourselves!"

The presence of such holes, that is, contexts in which neither strategy has to apply, suggests a drag-chain, of course. If the simple reflexive pronoun disappeared of its own accord, the language would then be in a state of inability to mark reflexive coreference, so the emphatic suffix would be impressed into service to fill this functional vacuum.

But claiming that the replacements in English and Romance are drag-chains raises the symmetrically opposite problem from the one raised by the push-chain hypothesis. Namely, just as push-chains do not leave holes, drag-chains do not lead to functional overlaps, that is, contexts in which the two strategies both apply simultaneously to mark a single function. But functional overlaps do exist, as we saw in (7) for Spanish. The situation is summarized by the diagrams in (18). Push-chains create overlaps, drag-chains create holes, but the situation as actually exhibited in Romance involves both.



A way out of this dilemma is to claim that the replacement began as one of the two processes and then afterwards shifted to the other. Since both processes will have been in effect during part of the replacement, the presence both of overlapping contexts and of holes will be explained.

Now, there are two possibilities. One is that the simple reflexive pronoun began the issue by disappearing on its own in some contexts. A drag-chain effect encouraged the compound reflexive to be developed for use in a subset of these contexts. Then, the spread of

the compound reflexive picked up analogic momentum, causing it to overtake the receding simple reflexive in other contexts where the latter was still used. The second possibility is that the compound reflexive started things off by appearing spontaneously in some oblique NP's, causing the now redundant simple reflexive to be dropped there, in push-chain fashion. Then, it is the disappearance of the simple reflexive which gathers momentum, causing it to recede more quickly than the oncoming compound reflexive. Comparing these two possibilities, we see that we must choose between two sources initiating the change: the loss of the simple reflexive and the development of the compound reflexive. Such a choice can only be highly speculative here, but there are some considerations which can help decide our guess. One is that the overwhelming majority of the world's languages have strategies for marking reflexive coreference. We conclude that reflexives are natural, functionally desirable strategies. It seems unlikely that an established strategy marking such a common function would start to disappear of its own accord without something else already there to take its place. On the other hand, the initial shift of a reference-emphasis strategy to marking reflexive coreference in oblique NP's can be motivated functionally: the coreference marked by a reflexive in oblique positions like the ones in (2), (5), and (9) is pragmatically unusual, hence an emphasis strategy is natural there. We can easily imagine that the association of an emphasis strategy with the reflexive coreference which occasioned it by virtue of its unusualness could be reinterpreted as a primary form-function relationship; that is, the reflexive coreference replaces the emphasis as the function associated with and carried by the strategy. Once reinterpreted in this way, the erstwhile emphasis strategy is free to appear in other reflexive NP's even when no particular emphasis is desired.

I propose, then, that the reflexive replacement in French, Spanish, and English began by the reinterpretation of an emphasis morpheme (French même, Spanish mismo, English self) as a reflexive in certain oblique NP's. The next step is the shift, in those NP's, from the simple reflexive pronoun being the primary mark of the reflexive to the newly adapted emphatic morpheme being the primary mark of the reflexive. This is quite natural: the ex-emphatic has a higher cognitive profile than the more syntacticized simple pronoun. We actually saw such a shift documented for Spanish; re-

call (7) and (9), illustrating the primacy of mismo over si in marking the reflexive. But once the simple pronoun has become redundant, we can presume it began to be optional, and ultimately to be dropped. Now, I further claim that the dropping of the pronoun as a mark of reflexivity in oblique NP's was extended analogically to the dropping of the pronoun as a reflexive marker in other contexts, even where the ex-emphatic was not used.

The evidence from Romance indicates that the loss of the simple reflexive may have progressed by steps along certain lines of weakness. For example, the oblique NP illustrated in (4), namely, a locative phrase with a verb of perception, is never marked for reflexivity by a compound strategy. If such an oblique position is relatively safe from invasion by an oncoming compound strategy descended from an emphatic, it is perhaps because it is a position in which, for some reason, reflexive marking is the least salient. This being so, a simple reflexive pronoun on the wane may be expected to be dropped there before it is dropped in more easily reflexivized NP's. This has already happened in Spanish, as we saw above in (12). We have noted that the non-appearance of si in (12) is exceptional. We can now explain this exception as a result of the stagewise loss-in-progress of that pronoun. French exhibits a more advanced stage of loss, of course. But for Old English it is necessary to postulate that the analogic dropping of the simple reflexive eventually extended to all its contexts of occurrence, and this well before the compound reflexive marked by self was really established firmly. Extreme as this may appear, in the absence of evidence from earlier periods, this scenario seems to be a plausible one.

I close now with two final comments on the scenario proposed here for reflexive replacement. Firstly, in French and Spanish, soi and si are clearly on the way out. However, the reflexive pronoun as object of the verb remains strong and vigorous. Can we really believe that the Pre-English *sik could have been analogically dropped even as object of the verb? I think the key to this matter lies in the fact that verbal object pronouns in Romance are clitics, whereas object pronouns of prepositions are not. The clitic-hood of French se and Spanish se isolates these forms sufficiently from soi and si to protect them from the analogic lever which is otherwise wiping out the simple reflexive. All we need note for Old English is that there was no clitic-non-clitic distinction in the personal pronoun system, so

even reflexive objects of verbs were not immune from loss.⁹

Secondly, there is evidence that self was used as a reflexive marker in prepositional phrases earlier than it was so used in objects of the verb. Sentence (19):

- (19) nu ic thaes tacen wege sweetol on me selfum
("I now carry a sign of it visibly on myself.")

is cited in Visser (1963, Vol I p. 420) as typical of the earliest extant documents, in that self is appended to a pronoun object of a preposition. However, the earliest documents never show self used as a reflexive marker on direct objects; rather, we find the bare personal pronoun used reflexively, as in

- (20) tha getrymede ic me "Then I strengthened myself."

Only later in King Alfred's time do we find optional self with direct objects, as in (15) - (17). This confirms our idea that the shift from emphasis to reflexivity occurs naturally in certain oblique NP's first, and only later spreads to objects of the verb.

Footnotes

1) The forms cited are the accusative case forms. In the dative case we find Gothic sis and Old Norse sér, reflecting Proto-Germanic *siz. Old High German lacked a dative reflexive; the nonreflexive dative personal pronouns were also used reflexively. Thus, Old High German partook of the beginnings of the loss of *sik, which loss, carried to completion in English, is the subject of this paper. But later, High German generalized the accusative reflexive sich to the dative as well.

2) We should note that the situation in syntax is not the same as in phonology. In the study here, there is no question of a distinctive opposition being threatened by encroachment, as there is in the case of a vowel drifting towards another vowel. Rather, the push-effect is that of forced redundancy, resulting in the eventual loss of the strategy made redundant. Similarly, the drag-effect is the filling of a functional vacuum rather than a drift due to the removal of the need to maintain a distinctive opposition.

3) As an example of verb-intransitivization as a reflexive strategy, consider the following sentences from Lakota:

- (i) John Mary aeyokas'in "John peeked at Mary."
- (ii) John aeyoic'ikas'in "John peeked at himself."

The morpheme -ic'i-, put in the appropriate slot of a transitive verb-complex, makes that verb syntactically intransitive and semantically reflexive.

4) There is some evidence for a historical hierarchy; (i) compound reflexive, (ii) simple pronoun reflexive, (iii) verbal reflexive. A strategy more towards the head of the list tends to push a lower one out of existence. The replacements discussed here all exemplify one of the possibilities of this. Further discussion may be found in Faltz 1976b.

5) I wish to thank Andrés Gallardo for the Spanish data, and Michèle Gans for assistance with the French data.

6) The form mismo is masculine singular. This automatically rules out María as an antecedent in (7). However, if we change María to Pedro, (7) remains unambiguous, due to the subject-antecedence property of si.

7) There may be a way of listing oblique NP's according to how difficult it is for a compound reflexive to appear in them. In general, compound reflexives appear very easily in about-phrases, as in (10); they never appear in locative phrases with verbs of perception, as in (12). The directional phrase in (14) is intermediate.

8) The use of sí instead of él in (12) is still acceptable, but considered bookish. The loss is thus not quite complete.

9) It is interesting to note that before the syntactic conditions controlling the clitic-nonclitic distinction in French pronouns became frozen, it was possible to get compound reflexives (optionally) as direct objects. An example (Thirteenth Century):

- (i) les fames honissent et avilenissent eles meismes
et tout lor lignage
("The women dishonor and degrade themselves and
their whole estate.")

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