

Why Me? Role-Splitting Self-Reference and the Syntax–Discourse Interface

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The rapid rise of large language models has made a central question newly urgent for theoretical linguistics: what aspects of grammatical knowledge remain invisible when language is treated mainly as surface distribution? This paper addresses this question through a small but theoretically revealing anomaly in English: local first-person object pronouns in environments where reflexive morphology is normally expected. Standard binding accounts predict the contrast in (1).

- (1) a. I saw myself.
- b. *I saw me.

Yet naturally occurring data show that local *I ... me* sequences are not simply performance errors or free informal variants of *I ... myself*. Under restricted discourse conditions, examples such as (2) become interpretable.

- (2) a. I discharged me.
- b. I bought me a scooter.
- c. I saw me.

This paper proposes a role-sensitive account of exceptional local first-person pronouns. The central claim is that local self-reference must be analyzed along two interacting dimensions: referential identity (or identity of the individual index), and discourse-role identity (or identity of the role value under which that individual is represented in discourse). In ordinary reflexive self-reference, these dimensions converge, and *I ... myself* refers to the same speaker and present that speaker as one role-unified discourse self. In exceptional local-pronoun self-reference, they diverge, and *I ... me* remains referentially identical, but the speaker is construed under two distinct discourse-role values.

This study is based on targeted corpus attestations from the COCA, supplemented by naturally occurring public discourse and scripted dialogue treated as publicly circulating discourse. Local self-reference examples like (2), which were extracted using the construction/lemma-based format, were coded at two levels, predicate-assigned thematic roles (e.g., Agent, Patient, Theme, Experiencer, etc.), and discourse-role configurations (e.g., Evaluator/Evaluated self, Agentive/Affected self, Addresser/Addressed self, and Observer/Observed self).

The analysis shows that local *me* becomes interpretable only when predicate-based thematic asymmetry is contextually enriched into discourse-role asymmetry. Thus, *I discharged me* is licensed when the speaker is construed as both institutional agent and affected self; *I bought me a scooter* when the speaker is both agentive purchaser and benefited recipient; and *I saw me* when the speaker is both observer and observed self. The pronoun *me* does not introduce a second individual, but preserves a role distinction that *myself* would tend to integrate into a single discourse-self representation.

The paper contributes to debates on binding, reflexivity, and the syntax–discourse interface by showing that local anaphoric form choice cannot be modeled over undifferentiated individuals alone. In the age of AI, such rare but principled patterns show why theoretical linguistics remains indispensable.

Selected References

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