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ME, MYSELF, AND I: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF UNBOUND REFLEXIVE
PRONOUNS IN ENGLISH

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For Sara Nordin

Thank you for making my world a more beautiful place.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the social meaning potential of unbound reflexives and how its social meanings are connected to structural properties of the reflexive, associations with particular speech styles, and iconic interpretations of the reflexive's form. *Myself* and *yourself* — the reflexive variant of first and second person singular pronouns — often emerge as socially and prescriptively marked in sentences like, “Amber and myself will need to take a raincheck”. In syntactic contexts like coordination, the reflexive variant is not required and can alternate with either the nominative *I* or accusative *me*. While optional uses of reflexives have been shown to have pragmatic functions of logophoricity and emphasis (Kuno 1987; Zribi-Hertz 1989; a.o.), I argue for a distinct and additional way that optional reflexives can be leveraged socially.

In examining their indexical potential across a range of contexts, I show that unbound reflexive pronouns are associated with formality and its related stances of politeness, indirectness, and emotional distance. More specifically, they are prominently associated with a professional workplace style of speech and related meanings such as legitimacy, credibility, competence, and seriousness. I also offer an analysis of how its morphological structure of possession [*my* + *self*] makes the reflexive form an effective semiotic resource for conveying indirectness: it refers to the speaker as “the self which belongs to the speaker”. Languages users themselves also rationalize the feature's link to indirectness and other social qualities by invoking narratives of iconicity in metalinguistic commentary. For example, non-reflexives like *me/I/you* are described as plain and direct due to their short length. Reflexives are described as excessive and indirect as a result of their comparatively longer length.

Given the scarcity of third-wave approaches to morpho-syntactic variation, this dissertation explores how speakers deploy the unbound reflexive as a stylistic resource whose social meaning emerges in local contexts and ideologically negotiated (Eckert 2012). I conduct a mixed-methods analysis of three primary data sources: public discourse about the feature as it emerges in Internet metalinguistic commentary, a matched-guise perception experiment comparing perceptions of *me*,

myself, and *I*, and a selection of naturally occurring language production in television media. This case study of a morpho-syntactic feature expands the small but growing body of work theorizing how non-phonological variation operates (Lavandera 1978; Moore 2021; Eckert 2019). Previous first-wave research on unbound reflexives shows that this feature does not correlate with demographic features (Angermeyer & Singler 2002; Maddeaux 2014; Paterson 2018), which aligns with the findings of the present dissertation. As a feature without strong demographic correlates, the unbound reflexive's social meaning does not have its roots in an n-th order association (Silverstein 2003) or as an indicator (Labov 1972a). The macro-social is still highly relevant, which I demonstrate in my analysis of how prescriptivism, standard language ideology, and class-based ideologies about hypercorrection affect the evaluation of a feature that is widely considered to be prescriptively incorrect, yet is associated with formality.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The sociolinguistic feature

Seated on a flight home from a syntax conference, myself and the other passengers listened as the pilot welcomed us aboard:

*Maria and myself have the pleasure of working with a wonderful cabin crew. [...]
If there is anything that Maria or myself can do to make your flight more comfortable,
let us know.*

I quickly added these utterances to my growing collection of *myself* in coordination and other intriguing reflexives, with examples coming in regularly from mundane academic emails:

If you have any questions, please ask Karlos or myself.

This collection soon led to a conceptualization of this linguistic feature as a socially meaningful morpho-syntactic variable, one that is also prescriptively fraught at a high level of conscious awareness. Referring to this variable as “the unbound reflexive”, I treat the form *myself* as a socially marked variant that occurs in environments where *I* or *me* are alternative variants. While *myself* is the most common form and coordination the most common environment, other reflexive forms (especially *yourself*) and non-coordinate environments can also emerge as socially marked in similar ways. These prescriptively and socially marked uses of the reflexive exist as a small subset of the many uses of the reflexive, such as syntactically required reflexives, logophoric reflexives, and intensifiers, which I treat as outside the scope of my variable of focus. However, I do attend to reflexives more holistically as a means of understanding the connection between the linguistic form and its social meaning. With a flexibly defined notion of the socially marked unbound reflexive, I pursue a sociolinguistic investigation of this understudied morpho-syntactic variable.

This dissertation examines the indexical potential of unbound reflexive pronouns in English. In taking a third-wave approach to language variation, I seek to understand how speakers deploy the

unbound reflexive as a linguistic resource whose social meaning gains specificity in local contexts and is ideologically negotiated. Social meaning refers to non-denotational meanings that relate to a speaker's personal qualities, affects, stances, and personas. I conduct a mixed-methods analysis of three primary data sources: online metalinguistic commentary, a matched-guise experiment, and naturally occurring language production in television media. Together, these distinct methodological angles inform how I investigate the overarching question of this dissertation: What are the potential social meanings of the unbound reflexive? Broadly speaking, I claim that the unbound reflexive indexes particular qualities and stances associated with formality, but more specifically, a professional style and high-class style. To develop a nuanced analysis of how these social meanings are constructed and situated, I explore how these meanings are connected to structural properties of the reflexive, stylistic associations, and iconicity, as detailed in (1).¹ I also investigate how prescriptivism, standard language ideology, and class-based ideologies about hypercorrection influence listeners' evaluation of the feature.

- (1) What are the potential social meanings of the unbound reflexive? How are these meanings connected to:
 - a. the morphological structure of reflexives as possessive NPs,
 - b. associations with particular speech styles, and
 - c. iconic interpretations of the reflexive's form?

By moving from questions of *what* to questions of *how*, it is also possible to begin to understand *why* a feature exhibits certain behaviors and associations. That is, why does the unbound reflexive convey the particular social meanings that it does? While this is a question that could be interpreted as a diachronic one (certainly an informative angle), I interpret this question as an ideological one that seeks to understand the synchronic coherence between the structure of this linguistic form and its social meaning, including its stylistic deployment. Although this question asserts that this

1. The organization of these sub-questions is loosely inspired by Moore (2023: 61) who discusses how the social meaning of a grammatical variant can develop from more than one root: 1) the semantics of a variant, 2) an indexical association between a variant and the character types perceived to use the variant, and/or 3) sound symbolism. While Moore (2023) refers to these as trajectories, in the sense that they are roots from which social meaning derives, I am more agnostic about directionality and chronology of development.

coherence is non-arbitrary, I still acknowledge that these social meanings have developed within complex social systems and are not pre-determined by the form, even though I suggest the form is a key ingredient.

As a case study of a morpho-syntactic variable, this dissertation contributes to a small but growing body of work on non-phonetic variables (Acton & Potts 2014; Acton 2019; Beltrama & Staum Casasanto 2017; Cheshire 2013; D’Arcy 2007; Krejci & Hilton 2017; Moore 2021, among others), many of which investigate how the semantic meaning or pragmatic effect of a form facilitates its social meaning. Third-wave case studies on morpho-syntactic variables are especially important for continuing to develop a comprehensive theory of sociolinguistic variation at all levels of grammar (Moore 2021) — a challenge that was first confronted by Lavandera (1978) who argues that, while sociolinguistic research should extend beyond phonological variation, the field is lacking articulated theories of morphological, syntactic, and lexical alternations due to the difficulty of extending the notion of the phonological variable to other types of variation. As sociolinguistic theory has progressed across the first-, second-, and third-wave, a stylistic approach to the study of language variation has neutralized many of the first-wave difficulties of studying syntactic variation.² That said, syntactic variables remain under-represented in variationist research and there is a need for increased attention to how variation at different levels of grammar operate together (Moore 2021). Thus, while this dissertation focuses only on a case study of unbound reflexives, hopefully it will prove useful for research that is theorizing the relationship between social meaning and grammatical variation (Moore 2023) and surveying social meaning making as it stretches from prosody to morpho-syntax (Eckert 2019).

2. For example, first-wave approaches to variation focused on the relative frequency of referentially equivalent phonetic variants, which is difficult to extend to syntactic variation where there is not always strict denotational equivalence between forms and the forms may not occur frequently enough to make quantitative analysis informative. However, the third-wave has moved away from quantifying the relative frequency of alternating forms, instead examining how particular forms are used in social interaction and as components of style (Moore 2021: 55).

1.2 The structure of reflexives

In the body of this dissertation, I analyze metalinguistic commentary, a matched-guise experiment, and language production data in order to understand the social life of this feature. In short, I claim that it is broadly associated with a formal style and the related meanings of polite, indirect, and impersonal. I also claim that it is associated with two more specific formal styles, a professional style and a high-class style. In this section, however, I take a step back and set the stage for this social analysis by examining the linguistic structure of reflexives in order to explore how its structure might connect to the social meanings of the unbound reflexive. Specifically, I suggest that the reflexive's morphology as a possessive NP makes it an effective semiotic resource for indexing meanings related to indirectness.

In this section, I also discuss other uses of the reflexive. I consider how they may or may not be related to the social meaning of the unbound reflexives I analyze, most typified by *myself* in coordination, which are just a subset of uses of the reflexive. The reflexive form has a range of syntactic and pragmatic uses. For instance, the reflexive form is syntactically required in certain environments and cannot alternate with personal pronouns. In other environments, especially long-distance binding, the reflexive pronoun can alternate with personal pronouns and has a pragmatic function related to logophoricity. The reflexive form can even be used as an adjunct. I first focus on the socially marked unbound reflexives of this dissertation and provide my analysis of why the reflexive form is an effective semiotic resource. Then, I turn to other pragmatic uses of the reflexive and argue that they are not the root of the social meanings I discuss in this dissertation. In fact, those pragmatic uses would predict very different types of meaning.

1.2.1 Possession as indirect reference

The form *myself* can be analyzed morphologically as a possessive NP [*my* + *self*].³ Even though it is a possessive NP, it has the same referent as the alternative personal pronoun forms *me/I*. However, I suggest that its morphological complexity as a possessive NP is relevant to how this form can be interpreted as conveying additional pragmatic or social meaning. In Frege's terms, the "reference" of *myself* is the same as *me/I*, but the "sense" is different (Frege 1892). The analytical challenge is identifying the sense of *myself* and how the sense makes it semiotically available for conveying indirectness. One potential analysis is that the "self" in [*my* + *self*] corresponds to just one part of the speaker and the form *myself* is used as a metonymic reference to the speaker. If it is a metonym, then it is not a direct form of reference, but rather an indirect form of reference via the "inalienably possessed self".⁴

That said, it is also possible to analyze the sense of *myself* in a way that does not assert that the possessive structure is necessarily a part-whole relation. Even just the morphological complexity of possession can give rise to an interpretation of indirectness. Under this analysis, the "inalienably possessed self" need not be a partition of the speaker; it can correspond to the whole speaker. Whether "self" corresponds to a partition or to the whole speaker, the structure of possession still carries a sense of indirectness, because [*my* + *self*] is interpreted as "the self which belongs to the speaker", rather than simply "the speaker", though these are referentially equivalent. The possessive structure is more derivationally complex as it introduces a "self" and the possessor "my" identifies to whom that self belongs.

3. Throughout this section, I explain my analysis using the form *myself*, but the same can be said for the form *yourself*. While the third person *himself* and *themselves* are not technically structures of possession, there are dialects that use *hissself* and *theirselves*. On the other hand, there are dialects with the form *meself*. This variation is unsurprising given that, historically, reflexive pronouns were not structures of possession, rather an accusative pronoun *me/you/him/her/them* optionally followed by an independent intensifier *self*. These words later fused and phonological reduction may have contributed to their re-analysis as a possessive structures (König & Siemund 2000). Even for the reflexive forms that are not strictly possessive structures, they are still more morphological complex.

4. Although English does not morphologically mark alienability distinctions, we can understand this to be a form of inalienable possession since the self is always someone's self. Someone else cannot possess your self and you cannot possess someone else's self.

Further evidence that the sense of *myself* is distinct from its referentially equivalent alternatives *me/I* comes from the fact that *myself* triggers third person rather than first person agreement, as shown in (2). Thus, while *myself* does refer to the speaker, this third person agreement indicates that it may be interpreted as akin to referring to yourself in the third person: another way in which *myself* can be construed as indirect.

(2) Eliezer is one of them, myself is another.

(Gwen Danielson, quoted in *Rolling Stone*)⁵

As a linguistic strategy of indirectness, it is very useful for conveying politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987). It is also suitable for conveying social distance and a concealment of one's emotional/personal self in favor of a more rational/objective self. These meanings of indirectness, politeness, and emotional distance are commonly associated with formality (Irvine 1979). Furthermore, foregrounding the rational and objective self is a crucial component of professionalism, which has historically valued competence and expertise (Evetts 2014). Using the form *myself* or *yourself* is a strategy that not only contributes to a formal and professional style, but also to relationship building in the professional workplace, where there is an expectation to cultivate collegial and cooperative relationships, but ensure that they are not rooted in emotional closeness, but rather respect and acknowledgment of each other's competence (Evetts 2014).

1.2.2 Syntactically required reflexives

While syntactically required reflexives are not socially meaningful, they are relevant because they have established reflexives as available pronoun forms. A reflexive is required in sentences like *I surprised myself, I defended myself, I looked at myself in the mirror, I bought myself some chocolate*. In these structures, *myself* does not alternate with non-reflexive variants and simply indicates

5. Tessa Stuart. "None of the So-Called Zizians Have Told Their Side of the Story — Until Now." *Rolling Stone*, 23 Apr. 2026, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/gwen-danielson-zizians-interview-1235552043/>

co-reference with a first person singular antecedent.⁶ Thus, *myself* is already a well-established grammaticalized anaphor that is co-referent with a first person antecedent. There are certainly other phrases that could be used a form of indirect reference, such as *my heart*, *my soul*, *my body*, *my brain*, or *my spirit*, but these are not grammaticalized pronouns that refer to a first person antecedent. Thus, the syntactically bound reflexive is crucially related to the unbound reflexive, not as the source of its social meaning, but as the reason it is available to be used as a pronoun.

While the status of *myself* as a first person bound anaphor makes it especially ready to be used in unbound contexts as a first person pronoun, that is not a prerequisite for the development of a socially meaningful form of first person reference. It is linguistically possible and attested for a new first person pronoun to grammaticalize from a lexical item, as evidenced in Cheshire's (2013) documentation of the emergence of *man* as a new first person pronoun in Multicultural London English.⁷ *Man* triggers third person agreement, even when referring to a first person referent. While grammaticalization of a lexical item is possible, there is an additional reason that phrases like *my heart*, *my soul*, *my body*, *my brain*, or *my spirit* would not be great candidates for the type of social meanings that *myself* index. These other phrases make salient a nominal (*heart*, *soul*, etc.) that also happens to refer precisely to the emotional and bodily aspects of ourselves that we seek to avoid portraying in a professional domain.

To summarize thus far, I have suggested that *myself* is an effective semiotic resource because it

6. In the case of first and second person bound reflexives, the co-reference is semantically vacuous because there is no ambiguity in the referent of first and second person pronouns. In the case of third person pronouns, there can be ambiguity in the referent and the bound reflexive forces co-reference. For this reason, it is unsurprising that, historically, third person reflexives developed prior to first and second person reflexives (König & Siemund 2000: 23).

7. Cheshire (2013) proposes that *man*'s emergent rhetorical functions as a pronoun are rooted in its use as a pragmatic marker and address form. Specifically, the pragmatic marker and address term *man* signals group solidarity and friendship. Using *man* as a first person pronoun enables the speaker to make their utterance polite and non-confrontational and to position themselves as part of a group, thereby lending authority and credibility to their utterance. Interestingly, Cheshire (2013) also connects the indirectness of this form ("using the third person form *man* rather than *I* distances the speaker from what he is saying") to its politeness and non-confrontational function (Cheshire 2013: 622). Viewed in relation to the unbound use of *myself*, this case study of *man* demonstrates that indirect forms of self-reference can be useful politeness strategies, but that their full social meaning potential and stylistic associations, are far more socially complex. The use of *man* indexes a streetwise urban persona and is primarily used by men, an association far from the business professional and high-class associations of *myself*.

has the same reference as alternative first person pronouns, but its morphology of “the self which belongs to the speaker” is a form of indirect reference. As an indirect form of reference, *myself* is further related to politeness, removal of the emotional/personal, social distance, objectivity, and formality. I showed that syntactically required reflexive anaphors do not carry social meaning but are important, because these constructions have led to *myself* being a grammaticalized form. The full analysis that I have proposed is unique, but certain aspects align with a suggestion made by Parker et al. (1990) regarding these types of unbound reflexives. They suggest that *me/I* refer directly to the discourse participant, whereas the typically anaphoric function of *myself* makes it an impersonal form that represents a discourse participant as a discourse referent (a topic of discourse). Distinct from my suggestion, Parker et al. (1990) do not discuss the structure of possession. Some syntactic and semantic analyses of reflexives such as Cantrall (1974) and Déchaine & Wiltschko (2017) have discussed the possessive structure of reflexives, but not in relation to the reflexive pronoun’s effectiveness as a semiotic resource. Finally, my analysis also loosely relates to Stern’s (2022) claim that the reflexive pronoun portrays a single entity as having multiple roles, but she does not connect this to indirectness and impersonality rooted in a structure of possession, instead connecting it to emphasis.

1.2.3 Logophoric and emphatic uses of the reflexive

I now turn to other uses of the reflexive pronoun beyond the socially marked unbound reflexives that are the focus of this dissertation. While the syntax and pragmatics literature has largely neglected to discuss the types of unbound reflexives that I analyze, there is significant literature examining other constructions where a reflexive pronoun and personal pronoun can alternate (e.g., long-distance binding and picture-NPs) or a reflexive can be used as an intensifying adjunct. In personal pronoun/reflexive alternations, the reflexive pronoun has been posited to ensure that the referent is the logophoric center (physical or mental perspective holder), or to intensify/emphasize the discourse prominence of the referent. The perspectivizing effect of the reflexive pronoun has

been robustly analyzed in different ways, with foundational work by Cantrall (1974) on viewpoint, Kuno (1987) on empathy, and Zribi-Hertz (1989) on the subject of consciousness.

To illustrate a case of physical perspectivizing, I present the examples in (3) from Cantrall (1974: 146). We, the observers, are looking at a picture that contains adults and children. The adults have their backs towards us. In (3a) with *them*, it is ambiguous whether the children are in the foreground or the background of the picture: the perspective of the observers or the adults is possible. In (3b) with *themselves*, the children are unambiguously in the foreground: the perspective is from the adults.

- (3) a. The adults in the picture are facing away from us, with the children placed behind them.
- b. The adults in the picture are facing away from us, with the children placed behind themselves.

To illustrate a case of mental perspectivizing, I present Hole's (2002) analysis of the example from Harry Potter in (4). The reflexive *himself* is used and the complement of *saw* is "clearly a representation of Harry's mind" (Hole 2002: 7). The personal pronoun *him* is a possible alternative, as in the constructed example in (5). Most importantly, Hole (2002) argues that (5) is also compatible with a logophoric reading, so *himself* is not a prerequisite of logophoricity, but its use does ensure a logophoric reading.

- (4) Harry saw Moody's magical eye travel over Snape, and then, unmistakably, onto himself.
- (5) Harry saw Moody's magical eye travel over Snape, and then, unmistakably, onto him.

The above examples of physical and mental perspectivizing are only the tip of the iceberg of the literature concerning subtle logophoric differences between reflexive pronouns and personal pronouns, but they are a sufficient foundation for my response that these pragmatic functions are not the origin of the social meanings I analyze. First, if the social meanings of the unbound reflexive stemmed from a perspectivizing function we might predict that the social meanings would

be related to highlighting the referent's personal opinions or subjectivity, which contrasts with the social meanings we do find, like impersonal and objective. Second, for physical or mental perspectivizing, the reflexive pronoun is most useful in cases where there is a shift in perspective holder or where there is ambiguity in who is the perspective holder.⁸ In most of the socially marked uses of *myself* that I analyze, the speaker is indeed the logophoric center, but the reflexive is not needed to ensure that reading or resolve ambiguity.

Turning to the intensifier function of reflexive pronouns and reflexive adjuncts, the specific effects of this function vary, but tend to involve heightened discourse prominence, such as contrast. The examples in (6) demonstrate constructions where a reflexive pronoun is used instead of a personal pronoun in order to emphasize the referent in contrast to others. Not only can the reflexive form be used as a pronoun, but it can also be used as an adnominal adjunct or adverbial adjunct as in (7) (König & Siemund 2000). As an adjunct, the reflexive is completely optional, so it alternates with zero realization rather than a personal pronoun.

- (6) a. I think that Mary is taller than myself.
b. My sister likes ketchup on her hot dogs. As for myself, I prefer mustard.
- (7) a. I myself will attend the meeting.
b. I earned that money myself.

Just as with the perspectivizing function of the reflexive, I suggest that the intensifying function of the reflexive is not the origin of the social meanings I propose for the unbound reflexive. First, reflexives as intensifiers serve to make the referent more prominent and centralized, which is very distinct from what we observe in the social meaning of unbound reflexives where the referent is decentralized in the sense of indirectness and social distance. Second, in utterances like those in (6) and (7), there are aspects of the content or context that indicate a clear contrasting of different referents. There are certainly some examples of the unbound reflexive in my data where the ref-

8. There are perspectival constructions that only permit either a reflexive pronoun or personal pronoun (Cantrall 1974), but these are even less relevant for our purposes since there is no alternation.

erent is contrasted with another referent, but this does not seem to be an underlying characteristic of the social meaning of unbound reflexives. Since logophoric and emphatic reflexives do not engender the type of indirectness associated with socially marked unbound reflexives, they offer the important insight that, while the morphological form of the reflexive makes it semiotically available for conveying indirectness, the reflexive form is not confined to this meaning as it has other distinct uses.

In sum, the unbound reflexives that I analyze in this dissertation are socially meaningful in ways that are not rooted in other pragmatic functions like logophoricity and intensification. Although these functions tend to be distinct, it is certainly possible for there to be instances where it is ambiguous what the function of the reflexive is or where multiple social and pragmatic functions are invoked at once. Across the socially marked, pragmatically marked, and syntactically required reflexives, the linguistic utility of the reflexive is rooted in the fact that it is a more prolix and complex form than a personal pronoun and, thus, signals some extra type of meaning (Hole 2002; König & Siemund 2000) — a type of speaker reasoning that can be captured by Acton's (2021) sociopragmatic framework that encompasses semantic, pragmatic, and social meanings. The extra meaning conveyed by the reflexive can vary, but I have demonstrated that for socially marked unbound reflexives there is a non-arbitrary connection between its morphological structure of possession and social meanings related to indirectness.

1.3 Theoretical orientation

A third-wave approach to sociolinguistic analysis views language variation as a stylistic resource for speakers to agentively place themselves in the social landscape, even though often subconsciously. Rather than as a mere reflection of static categories, linguistic practice is itself a force in the construction of interactional stances and social types (Eckert 2012), which, in turn, are influenced by and influence local and macro-social categories (Eckert 2016). Therefore, I treat the unbound reflexive not as a by-product of social categories, but as a meaning-making resource

within a speaker's sociolinguistic repertoire. Furthermore, I treat social meaning as encompassing non-denotational meanings that can implicitly index a speaker's personal qualities, affects, stances, and personas.

As I investigate the social meanings of the unbound reflexive, I view these meanings as underspecified and emerging as more specific in context, with influence from both speaker and hearer (Campbell-Kibler 2008; Eckert 2008; Eckert & Labov 2017; Eckert 2018).⁹ Accordingly, in enumerating the social meanings of the unbound reflexive, I do not view these as a fixed set of guaranteed meanings, but rather an indexical field — “a constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable” (Eckert 2008: 453). In addition to proposing specific, flexible, locally emerging, and ideologically mediated social meanings of the unbound reflexive, I attend to the way that metalinguistic awareness and metalinguistic commentary contribute to the creation, interpretation, and circulation of this feature's social meaning (Silverstein 2003; Johnstone et al. 2006).

In my analysis of the unbound reflexive, I discuss the feature's prominent association with formality and formal styles of speech. That said, I do not approach formality in the first-wave sense of a speaker's “amount of attention paid to speech” (Labov 1972b: 112). At the time, this type of formality was viewed as the only vector of style, thus style was reduced to a continuum of varying attention to speech (Labov 1972b, as discussed by Eckert 2012). Social agency was thus confined to supposed “careful speech” and considered as solely a way to suppress one's natural way of speaking and self-monitor one's correctness. In the third-wave, the approach to speaker agency and style has changed in crucial ways, such that agency is characterized by “tailoring linguistic styles in ongoing and lifelong projects of self-construction” (Eckert 2012: 98). Accordingly, style is not a cline of attention to speech. Style is a social process of differentiation: “styles in speaking involve the ways speakers, as agents in social (and sociolinguistic) space negotiate their positions

9. Underspecification, a general term referring to contextual sensitivity, has been applied to the analysis of sociolinguistic variables in terms of how “individual variables never have a single meaning, but a broader meaning potential” (Eckert 2016: 70).

and goals within a system of distinctions and possibilities. Their acts of speaking are ideologically mediated, since those acts necessarily involve the speaker's understandings of salient social groups, activities, and practices, including forms of talk" (Irvine 2001: 23–24). More concretely, style can pick out locations in the social terrain like "valley girls, cholos, cowboys, jocks, burnouts, Italian hoods" (Eckert 2008: 456).

Although I draw from these current theories of style, I treat style at a broader social level than the more localized personae named above. First, in taking a stylistic approach to formality, I use the term *formal style* as an umbrella for ways of speaking that are involved in invoking public and positional identities in the social order. This orientation to formality is drawn from one aspect of formality that Irvine (1979) describes:

It concerns which social identity (of the many that an individual might have) is invoked on a particular kind of occasion, with formal occasions invoking positional and public, rather than personal, identities. [...] This aspect of formality is involved in what many authors have interpreted as the formal event's emphasis on social distance (as opposed to intimacy) and respect (for an established order of social positions and identities).
(Irvine 1979: 778)

Under this view, the notion of "attention to speech" re-emerges as a concept that does not itself determine formality, but as a concept that plays a role in how formality is ideologized (in the metalinguistic commentary I analyze) as an overt attempt to stake one's claim in the social hierarchy or adhere to institutional norms, sometimes leading to perceptions of inauthenticity or excessiveness. That said, many times throughout the dissertation, I use the word "formal" simply to quote metalinguistic commentary or an attribute listed in a survey experiment, thus carrying substantial but unavoidable vagueness. Second, I also suggest that a *professional style* and *high-class style* are specific types of formal styles that are especially relevant to the unbound reflexive.

Although the indexical field and style have become well-established analytic frameworks within the third-wave, the application of these frameworks to morpho-syntactic variation is still lagging (Moore 2021). The field has struggled to move away from first-wave views of morpho-syntactic variation as a marker of class stratification that is pre-determined by differences in the frequency of

usage by working-class, middle-class, and upper-class speakers. Moore (2021: 57) emphasizes that even studies that do take an agentive approach to class-stratified variation often only consider social meaning in terms of a formal/informal distinction rather than exploring locally-situated meanings. Such research also tends to conflate non-standard with stigmatized:

The conflation of ‘non-standard’ and ‘stigmatized’ is particularly unhelpful when studying syntactic variation. [...] Many un(der)-examined syntactic items could be described as ‘non-standard’ (by virtue of their divergence from written standards) but they are not necessarily used to distinguish socially stratified social groups in ways that are easily linked to stigma and prestige. (Moore 2021: 57)

For example, the use of existential *there’s* or *there is* with a plural NP are both considered prescriptively incorrect, in contrast to *there are* with a plural NP. However, Krejci & Hilton (2017) demonstrate that, while uncontracted *there is* and *there are* are divided with respect to education-level, contracted *there’s* is widely used across education-levels. Furthermore, *there is* negatively affects perceptions of the speaker’s intelligence, education, articulateness, and wealth, while *there’s* does not (Hilton 2016). In other words, *there’s* is not sharply class-stratified nor is it stigmatized. Existential *it*, a morpho-syntactic feature of AAVE (African American Vernacular English), provides an example of a feature that is racially stratified in its usage, but is not stigmatized. According to King (2018: 111), this feature can be used in constructing a Black professional identity as a way to index racial identity, without using highly stigmatized features of AAVE. Even for negative concord — both highly class-stratified and stigmatized, Moore (2023) shows that, for a particular social group at Midlan High in England, it is not solely linked to ‘stigma’. It indexes delinquency and ideologically related meanings that are anti-institutional, anti-authority or rebellious and it has discourse functions of emphasis and surprise. These features demonstrate that prescriptive incorrectness, social stratification, and stigma do not always vary directly and, even when a feature is considered incorrect, socially stratified, and stigmatized, its social meanings are much more locally and interactionally nuanced than ‘stigma’.

This theoretical push is particularly important for the present dissertation, because I examine a linguistic feature that is considered to be prescriptively incorrect at a high degree of metalinguistic

awareness. Although prescriptively incorrect, my research reveals that it does not seem to be stigmatized. It is not stigmatized in that it is not a feature that is ascribed to marginalized groups, perceived as inferior, as revealing undesirable social qualities like laziness, and avoided in formal contexts. In fact, social meanings of the unbound reflexive related to formality, professionalism, and politeness call into question whether we should even consider the feature to be non-standard. This question is further complicated by the fact that this feature seems to not be class-stratified, racialized, or geographically localized. It is not my goal to determine whether this is a standard or non-standard feature, but rather, alongside Moore (2021), to advocate that the terms ‘prescriptively incorrect’, ‘non-standard’, and ‘stigmatized’ should not be seen as one and the same. Although I caution against any *a priori* use of these terms as synonymous, I do argue for the importance of examining the role that standard language ideology plays in the social evaluation of the unbound reflexive and its wide range of users (Lippi-Green 1993). For example, even though the feature itself is not wholly conceptualized as stigmatized, certain users of the feature may still be unjustly criticized along class-based lines and viewed as a *wannabe* or *try-hard*.

Lastly, while many aspects of my theoretical approach suggest moving away from macro-social categories, this is specifically a moving away from macro-social categories as the deterministic origin of language variation. Macro-social categories are still highly relevant to third-wave variationism. “The macro-social categories of variation studies — class, gender, ethnicity, age etc. — structure the conditions under which each of us lives, and to which our actions respond. In the process, we reproduce, potentially changing, that structure” (Eckert 2016: 3). Thus, macro-social categories — how they shape our lives and how we shape them through meaning-making practice — remain important even when attending to more interactionally local social meanings. The relationship between macro-social categories and local social meanings can be theorized in terms of Ochs’s (1993) framework of direct/indirect indexicality: linguistic features directly index stances, acts, and activities, which constitute and mediate an indirect indexical link to other domains of

social reality such as gender.¹⁰ In my analysis of the unbound reflexive, I do not find that this feature is indexical of a macro-social category. Instead, I find that it is most prominently associated with a corporate-like workplace domain. Drawing from Ochs's (1993), I treat this association as an indirect indexical link constituted by a web of direct links to stances of indirectness, politeness, emotional distance, seriousness, and credibility that are pragmatically useful in corporate workplaces. Crucially, similar to Ochs's (1993) discussion of non-exclusivity, I emphasize that the use of the unbound reflexive is not confined to business professionals; the feature's direct indexes are available to anyone and useful in other settings, but using the feature runs the risk of being interpreted as an attempt to portray a social class identity outside of one's reach.

In this dissertation, I apply this previous theoretical work to my analysis of previous research on the unbound reflexive (Chapter 2) and metalinguistic commentary, a matched-guise experiment, and locally-situated language production (Chapters 3–5). As part of my analysis, I propose that the potential social meanings of the reflexive and its stylistic associations can be schematized by the indexical field in Figure 1.1. These meanings, any one of which can be activated in a local context, are characterizations of the speaker who used the reflexive.¹¹ The meanings within the circle represent meanings that a speaker is likely to intend. Listeners do not necessarily construe the social meaning that was intended, and they can even perceive the speaker to be self-important, pretentious, a wannabe, or a try-hard, which are meanings that are unlikely to be intended by the speaker.

10. It is also possible for some features to directly index gender, though this is less common (Ochs 1993).

11. More specifically, these social meanings generally pertain to the narrator, not the referent of the pronoun. If the speaker uses an unbound *myself* or *yourself*, the social meanings pertain to the speaker. That said, since this feature is involved in negotiating and indexing the social order, the social meanings also have important implications for the interlocutor. For example, in referring to the interlocutor as *yourself*, the speaker is not just being polite or sophisticated themselves, but saying something about their interlocutor's social standing. It is rare for third person reflexives like *herself* to be truly unbound and to carry this type of social meaning, but indirectly quoted speech is a potential environment (e.g., *Leslie apologized for the email sent by the director and herself*). Here, it is ambiguous whether the reflexive pronoun is attributed to the speaker or to Leslie.

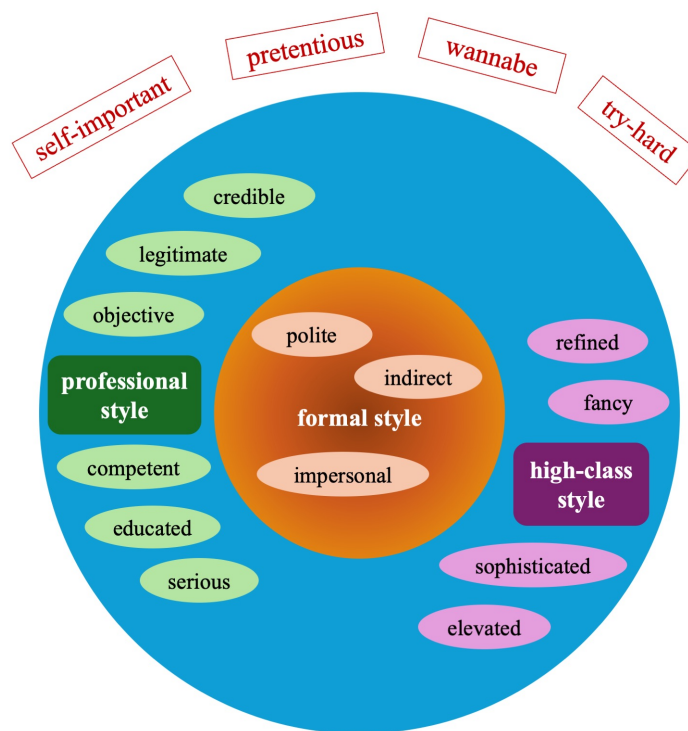


Figure 1.1: Indexical field for the unbound reflexive

In Figure 1.1, the three stylistic associations are written in white text and their associated qualities are in the ovals. I place the formal style in the center in order to show that formality is a core meaning of the unbound reflexive. The specific stances and qualities that are most closely connected to a formal style also appear in the center: polite, indirect, and impersonal (emotionally distant). As discussed in Section 1.3, while formality is integral to the social meaning of the unbound reflexive, there are further nuances to the types of formality that the unbound reflexive can invoke. The blue outer-circle depicts two types of formal styles. A *professional style* is closely linked to stances and qualities like credible, legitimate, objective, competent, educated, and serious, as well as those linked to formality more generally. This stylistic association corresponds to the perception of the reflexive as a recognizable feature of business and corporate-like workplaces. There is a less-prominent, but closely related, *high-class style* that is also associated with the unbound reflexive and characterized by stances and qualities like refined, fancy, sophisticated, and

elevated. This stylistic association corresponds more closely to the perception of this feature as upper-class (whether the speaker is actually upper-class or not).¹²

The two formal styles, a professional style and a high-class style, are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but I depict them separately because it is possible for one to emerge without the other and the potential social meanings cluster in this way. Their interrelation is not just about formality, but about a way to climb the social ladder that is either rooted in the work-ethic and entrepreneurship of the American Dream or rooted in the refinement of one's speech, behaviors, and appearance. Ideologies about "climbing the social ladder" are important to the evaluation of this feature. While the indexical field in Figure 1.1 does not illustrate how these social meanings are evaluated against a backdrop of standard language ideology, class anxieties, and speaker/hearer identities, these will be discussed throughout the dissertation.

1.4 Methodological approaches

Previous research on unbound reflexives has not taken a third-wave analytic approach nor used the methodologies which I undertake in this dissertation. The types of sentences that I analyze as socially marked were only briefly mentioned in early syntax work and syntacticians diverged in whether they considered the sentences grammatical (e.g., Cantrall 1974; Ross 1970; Saha 1987). Parker, Riley & Meyer (1990) were the first to introduce real-world examples of unbound reflexives in coordination, which prompted subsequent sociolinguistic research on the feature. However, this sociolinguistic research has been limited to three studies (Angermeyer & Singler 2002; Maddeaux 2014; Paterson 2018), which primarily focus on quantitative analysis of corpus data and examine language internal factors, speaker demographics, and the formality of the social context. These factors are analyzed using a first-wave framework in the sense that their analysis aims to reveal

12. The way that I cluster the meanings in terms of particular styles is based on a combination of my own intuitions about these styles, the metalinguistic commentary, research on professionalism (Evetts 2014), and research on formality and politeness (Irvine 1979; Brown & Levinson 1987).

correlations and relative frequencies of variants with respect to macro-social categories or social contexts. In Chapter 2, I review the contributions of previous syntactic and sociolinguistic research and how they inform my own analysis and methodological choices.

In Chapter 3, I analyze metalinguistic commentary with the goal of understanding how this feature is constructed in the public imagination. More specifically, I conduct a qualitative analysis of publicly available blogs, op-eds, and user comments that all involve explicit commentary on the unbound reflexive. This type of perception data is highly conscious and circulated in a public domain. Rather than providing insight into language perception in an individual localized context, it provides insight into the larger-scale ideological construction of this feature as ‘something’ — something people find worth having opinions about. Thus, throughout my analysis, I attend to how beliefs related to standard language ideology, related class-based ideologies, and prescriptivism shape the ways that Internet commenters generate an image of this feature. Woven throughout the commentary is a tension between the prescriptively incorrect status of the feature and its association with formality and white-collar workplaces. I begin by proposing that the unbound reflexive is most prominently associated with a business professional style and that this enregisterment is both revealed by and fueled by comments that situate this feature as belonging to particular workplace domains, with some even naming ‘business-speak’, ‘business-ese’, and ‘business English’. However, I subsequently show that commenters do not present a unified picture of *who* uses this feature, attributing it to a range of social classes. Likewise, commenters construct multiple narratives about *why* people use this feature. One narrative posits that speakers are motivated by prescriptive insecurity and use the reflexive in order to avoid other variants, while another narrative posits that speakers are motivated by a desire to convey specific social meanings related to formality, politeness, gentleness, or self-importance. Finally, the metalinguistic commentary is the most illuminating data source for understanding the way that people invoke iconic interpretations of the linguistic form to rationalize their perceptions of the feature’s meaning.

In Chapter 4, I also examine language perception, but as it pertains to an individual locally-

situated instance of usage. I carry out a matched-guise experiment in which participants are presented with a written stimulus (screenshot of a workplace email) and asked to rate certain attributes of the writer on a Likert scale. The stimulus contains a sentence whose subject is either *Alex and I*, *Alex and me*, or *Alex and myself*. The goal of this experiment is to address the question: How does pronoun choice influence how a writer is perceived? As part of this question, I also examine: 1) how participant demographics and attitudes affect their perception of the writer's pronoun choice, and 2) how the recipient of the email affects perceptions of the writer's pronoun choice. Participants are either told the email is written to a subordinate, colleague, or boss, thus varying the social stakes and relevance of social status in the stimulus context. The overarching finding from this experiment is that the reflexive is rated similarly to the nominative *I* for qualities like formal, educated, articulate, and professional. It does not pattern with the accusative *me*, which, unsurprisingly, is rated very low for those qualities. The most important finding is that when there are lower prescriptive stakes (the email recipient is a subordinate or the participant is less educated), the reflexive is rated as more formal than the nominative, but, when there are higher prescriptive stakes (the email recipient is a boss or the participant is highly educated), the reflexive is rated as less formal than the nominative. However, I claim that it is not prescriptivism alone that predicts these results, but rather prescriptivism and ideologies about hypercorrection.

In Chapter 5, I turn to my last primary data source: examples of unbound reflexives in scripted and unscripted TV. Specifically, I do a discourse analysis of uses of the unbound reflexive in the Bachelor, How To With John Wilson, the Righteous Gemstones, a Saturday Night Live skit, and the Austin Powers movie. In analyzing language production in this way, I do not aim for representativeness as corpus studies do. Rather, I aim to analyze these media sources individually and see the unique ways that the unbound reflexive is leveraged within a specific context by a specific speaker. While this approach to language production is relevant for all spontaneous everyday speech, I select these more performative media examples because the full discursive context is recorded. Furthermore, for many of my media sources, the personality and goals of the characters

have been carefully constructed throughout the course of the show, thus allowing us to see how the unbound reflexive contributes to the construction of that character and their social goals within the conversation and story arc. Across the examples, the reflexive contributes to the construction of meanings like authority, seriousness, maturity, scholarly rigor, credibility, legitimacy, and upper-class sophistication. The social meaning emerges differently depending on the local context, but I suggest that there are underlying similarities related to legitimization of one's social status or opinions. I show that they are not indexing "I am a business professional", but that there are ideological connections to workplace norms.

Together, these methodologies combine qualitative and quantitative methods of examining language perception and language production. In examining language perception through metalinguistic commentary and a matched-guise experiment, I bring to my analysis both a highly conscious abstract angle and a less conscious locally-situated angle. In examining language production through an in-depth qualitative analysis of individual media examples, I complement the existing large-scale corpus analyses of language production. The methods I pursue are informative for any linguistic feature, but they are especially suitable for the unbound reflexive, which does not appear to belong to a particular geographic place, sociodemographic category, or local community, though its social meaning is still interpreted in the context of all of those aspects that shape (and are shaped by) linguistic practice.

CHAPTER 2

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON SOCIALLY MARKED UNBOUND REFLEXIVES

2.1 Introduction

Although the relationship between personal pronouns and reflexive pronouns in English was fundamental to developments in syntactic theory during the 1960s–80s (Lees 1963; Ross 1970; Cantrall 1974; Chomsky 1981; Kuno 1987; Saha 1987; among others) the socially marked unbound reflexives that I analyze in this dissertation were only occasionally mentioned. In contrast, the alternation between personal and reflexive pronouns in non-socially marked constructions¹ (e.g., picture-NPs, locative PPs, comparatives, contrastives) was well-documented in this body of literature, with Cantrall (1974), Kuno (1987), and (Zribi-Hertz 1989) making influential claims about semantic and discourse pragmatic consequences related to logophoricity, as mentioned in Chapter 1. In this chapter, I first review the occasional mention of socially marked unbound reflexives this literature and then review their prominent role in subsequent papers (Parker et al. 1990; Angermeyer & Singler 2002; Maddeaux 2014; Paterson 2018).

2.2 The unbound reflexives lurking in early syntax literature

When socially marked unbound reflexives were mentioned in early syntax literature, it is unsurprising that only their syntactic relevance was considered; however, impressions of social markedness were unintentionally or subtly alluded to. Additionally, there was no consensus and little discussion of whether they are even considered grammatical, with authors relying primarily on their personal

1. I am not suggesting that there is an inherently categorical distinction between socially marked and non-socially marked reflexives, because the syntactic structure, intonation, prescriptivism, social context, and other stylistic factors are all contributing factors to social meaning. However, the metalinguistic commentary shows that there are certain uses of the reflexive (first/second person reflexives in coordination) that are socially marked in a particular way. For the present purposes, it is relevant to point out that there is a distinction, even if not absolute.

judgments. For example, in one of the most thorough works on English reflexives, Cantrall (1974) provides the following two examples, but refers to them as “colloquial” and rejects them with no further discussion. An example like (1a) is precisely the type of well-attested unbound reflexive whose social meaning I seek to analyze in this dissertation.

- (1) a. *This work was done under the direction of John, Mary, and myself.
- b. *I am different from yourself in one important respect.

(Cantrall 1974: 21, ex. 27-28)

In contrast to Cantrall’s (1974) dismissal of these constructions, first and second person unbound reflexives are one important type of evidence for Ross (1970) and his performative hypothesis.² He provides the set of examples in (2) and acknowledges that other people might assign different degrees of acceptability than his own. Ross (1970) states that the spectrum of acceptabilities in (2) are of interest, but, since generating a rule to predict this spectrum is not necessary for supporting his performative hypothesis, “this will not concern us here” (228). It is sufficient for his purposes that the acceptability and marginal acceptability of some of the sentences in (2) relies on the reflexive being the first person *myself* rather than a third person (such as *themselves*), which he says would lead to a complete lack of acceptability.³ Noteworthy for my purposes, Ross (1970) judges that *myself* is the most acceptable person/number, as are coordinate structures, which aligns with the focus and findings of this dissertation.

- (2) a. This paper was written by Ann and myself.
- b. ??This paper was written by myself.
- c. ?Ann and myself wrote this paper.
- d. *Myself wrote this paper.
- e. The lioness may attack Ann and myself.
- f. *The lioness may attack myself.

(Ross 1970: 228, ex. 21)

2. Broadly speaking, the performative hypothesis is that all declarative sentences contain an implicit main clause of something akin to *I declare to you that...*, which is present in the deep structure, but deleted in the surface structure. Since this implicit main clause contains an implicit *I* and *you*, it licenses first and second person anaphors in the overt declarative sentence.

3. Zribi-Hertz (1989) demonstrates that third person reflexives are possible in sentences like (2) when in a longer stretch of discourse where the referent is the subject of consciousness whose own narrative point of view is being presented.

Ross (1970) also mentions the possibility of the second person *yourself* being used in (3).

(3) ??This paper was written by Ann and yourself. (Ross 1970: 247, ex. 89)

The marginality of this sentence is not crucial for his analysis, because he uses distinct evidence to argue for an implicit *you* in a higher clause. Regardless, it is relevant for the present dissertation that Ross (1970) vaguely mentions dialectal differences regarding the acceptability of (3). He states that there are “those dialects of English” in which sentences like (3) are possible and that “for me, this sentence is highly dubious, but there are speakers who find no difference between it and (2a)” (Ross 1970: 248). It is not clear what “those dialects” are or who “there are speakers” refers to, but this type of description could suggest a perception that unbound first and second person reflexives are part of socially meaningful language variation.

Examples of unbound first and second person pronouns also appear in Saha (1987) who aims to develop a modified theory of reflexivization that can account for a fuller set of attested data. One type of data he aims to account for is “sentences in which there are reflexives without any antecedents in the structure”, which he exemplifies with the examples in (4) (Saha 1987: 219).

- (4)
- a. Lawyers in the group, including myself, voted for the proposal.
 - b. Lawyers in the group, myself included, voted for the proposal.
 - c. Lawyers like yourself ought to know better.
 - d. John, Harry, and myself were having dinner at the club.
[Some speakers of Standard English do not use reflexives in such contexts.]
 - e. This is a letter to myself.
 - f. This is a lesson in how to outsmart oneself.
 - g. There was no one besides himself in the room. (Saha 1987: 219, ex. 27)

Although it is not significant for Saha’s (1987) purposes, for the present dissertation, it is significant that he includes a note after example (4d) that “some speakers of Standard English do not use reflexives in such contexts”. Importantly, this note only pertains to (4d), which suggests that the use of coordinated *myself* in subject position is the only sentence of the set in (4) that Saha (1987) perceives to be socially marked, even though all of the examples (excluding (4f)) are environments

where the reflexive can be replaced with a personal pronoun.

Although Cantrall (1974), Ross (1970), and Saha (1987) only briefly mention the types of first and second person unbound reflexives that are the focus of this dissertation, their appearance in this early syntactic work demonstrate that there was an awareness that these examples exist. Furthermore, especially when in coordinate NPs, I've shown that these first and second person unbound reflexives are mentioned in such a way that hints at social markedness: Cantrall's (1974) "colloquial", Ross's (1970) "those dialects", and Saha's (1987) "some speakers of Standard English".

Other syntactic work such as Reinhart & Reuland (1993) aim to update Chomsky's (1981) binding theory to account not just for the complementarity of reflexives and personal pronouns but for environments that allow an alternation. Although they discuss many types of free *self*-forms, only one of their examples is of the socially marked sort that I analyze. When they give the example in (5), they do not suggest that the reflexive variant is socially marked in any way and they simply state that it is logophoric. As discussed in Chapter 1, an example like (5) is logophoric, but the reflexive variant is also socially marked. It is quite fitting, though perhaps coincidental, that they chose to construct an example using such a formal context: "the queen" rather than someone like "the neighbors".

(5) The queen invited both Max and {myself/me} for tea.

(Reinhart & Reuland 1993: 675, ex. 29b)

In conclusion, even though early syntax literature did not conceptualize of this phenomenon as a sociolinguistic feature nor did it even fully analyze its syntactic behavior, these are some of the earliest works to include examples of what later received more dedicated attention, beginning with Parker, Riley & Meyer (1990).

2.3 A linguistic feature worthy of study in its own right

In a short paper, Parker et al. (1990) coin the term *untriggered reflexive* (UR) to describe “a reflexive that speakers find generally acceptable even though it is not coreferential with another NP” (50). This term stands in contrast to *triggered reflexive*, which is a reflexive coreferential with another NP “in the same structure” (Parker et al. 1990: 50). By coining the term *untriggered reflexives* and dedicating a paper to them that includes attested examples of *myself* in coordination and other marked unbound reflexives, this paper helped to establish these constructions as a phenomenon worthy of in-depth attention in syntax, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics. I opt to use the term *unbound reflexives* instead of *untriggered reflexives*, but these are interchangeable for my purposes.⁴

Based on a qualitative analysis of real-world examples, Parker et al. (1990) propose that unbound reflexives are most common and acceptable in coordination, post-generic PPs,⁵ and picture-NPs, with the further observation that first and second person reflexives are favored over third person. Their real-world examples involving unbound reflexives in coordination, shown in (6), represent the type of prescriptively disputed examples whose social meaning I analyze most closely in this dissertation. Parker et al.’s (1990) examples illustrate attested uses in a range of spoken and published written sources from the 1980s. Although Parker et al. (1990) do not discuss social fac-

4. I use the term *unbound reflexive* because it is accessible to readers of different sub-fields. With its direct reference to antecedent binding, “unbound” more intuitively describes a situation in which a reflexive is not bound by an overt antecedent within its local domain. Some syntacticians would describe these constructions as implicitly bound (i.e., by the discourse) or long-distance bound (i.e., by an overt antecedent outside the binding domain), rather than unbound, but the term *unbound reflexive* is a recognizable term that is also already in circulation (Kang 1988; Filppula 1999; Hernández 2015; Kim & Song 2024) alongside *untriggered reflexive* and many other terms like *free self-forms* (Hernández 2015), *exempt anaphors* (Pollard & Sag 1994), and *sentence-free reflexives* (Zribi-Hertz 1989). Individual authors define and restrict the scope of these terms in different ways, but they do describe similar types of data. My data and analysis focus on a more limited set of socially marked constructions, especially first person reflexives in coordination, which could be included within some of these terms but have not been the focus of previous work.

5. Post-generic PPs are examples like, *There are groups for people like yourself* or *Most Coloradans, myself included, are mindful of fire safety*. In contrast to reflexives in coordination, these constructions are not as socially or prescriptively marked. This contrast in degree of markedness is not simply my own intuition, but also supported by my own findings in the metalinguistic commentary where *like/such as*-constructions are only occasionally mentioned. In fact, Parker et al. (1990) argue that these reflexives are actually bound by the generic head NP and are not truly untriggered reflexives.

(6) a. You should invite **Barbara and myself** back.
[Gus Hall on *Donahue*, 12 Jan. 1988]

b. All the bills are paid between **myself and my sister**.
[guest on *Donahue*, 6 Jan. 1988]

c. Annabeth Gish ... was on hand for the Canadian premier of *Desert Bloom*, which stars **herself, Voight, JoBeth Williams and Ellen Barkin**.
[*Vancouver Sun*, 24 May 1986, E1]

d. I know that this would be the first time that **commissioner Giamatti and myself** would be in the same area.
[Pete Rose, quoted in the *Boston Globe*, 21 July 1989, 65]

e. In any case, you'll have to discount **my wife and myself**.
[character in a novel by Ruth Rendall, *From Doon with Death*, Ballantine Books, 1964, 25-26]

f. If he had taken a few minutes... to talk with either **myself or another representative from Enrollment Services**
[administrator, Univ. of Massachusetts at Boston, quoted in *Mass Media*, Fall, 1986]

g. **Several of the employees and myself** wrote to the chairman of [...]
[From a letter to the editor of the *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*, 13 Nov. 1986, 10B, written by Cheryl B. Simoneaux]

(Parker et al. 1990: 65, ft. 2)

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the text). Parker et al. (1990) begin by describing how their proposal applies to picture-NPs (Warszawsky 1965). For the pair in (7) with the same denotational meaning, they state that a speaker who utters (7a) is focusing on their role as a discourse participant, whereas a speaker who uses (7b) is focusing on their role as the discourse referent (Parker et al. 1990: 60).

- (7) a. This is a picture of me.
b. This is a picture of myself.

Since picture-NPs were already well-documented in the literature, Parker et al.'s (1990) contribution lies more in how they use their proposal to account for a handful of unbound reflexives which are more pragmatically marked and prescriptively jarring. The most straightforward and literal distinction between discourse referent and discourse participant comes from (8a) and (8b), which are discursive contexts that emulate a picture-NP, even though not syntactically a picture-NP. The speaker is using the reflexive to refer to a representation (vision, picture) of themselves.

- (8) a. That is **myself**.
[Scrooge, on being presented with a vision of himself as a child, in
A Christmas Carol, MGM, 1938]
b. That's **myself**. [man pointing to a picture of himself on *Today*, 20 July 1987]
(Parker et al. 1990: 66, ft. 5)

They apply the same analysis to the examples in (9). For example, in (9a), the speaker is referring to himself as a discourse referent (i.e., a member of a class of lawyers) and minimizing his role as the speaker. For the second person *yourself* in (9c), the reflexive emphasizes Forbes as the discourse referent rather than the addressee (Parker et al. 1990: 61). Parker et al. (1990) do not analyze these examples any further, but I note that their social context aligns with the analysis I develop in this dissertation regarding the reflexive's association with formality. Examples (9a)–(9c) are uttered by established professionals in interview contexts: a lawyer, mayor, and businesswoman speaking to a businessman. Example (9d), though written by a college student, is in the context of an essay and contains the more formal “upon” as opposed to “on”, suggesting the student may have been

deploying the reflexive as part of a particular style, not just as a pragmatic tool.

- (9) a. It would be more efficient [for society] to do away **with myself** – lawyers.
[guest lawyer on *Sonya Live from LA*, 7 Jan. 1988]
- b. He’s much **like myself**, a very aggressive guy.
[Baton Rouge Mayor Pat Screen, quoted in *The Greater Baton Rouge Business Report*, Nov. 1988, 38]
- c. I have always been curious **about yourself**.
[Rona Barrett to Malcolm Forbes on *Larry King Live*, 8 Dec. 1987]
- d. This essay will try to describe the injustice that was inflicted **upon myself** by a teacher.
[student essay, Univ. of Massachusetts at Boston, Fall 1986]

(Parker et al. 1990: 66, ft. 5)

Returning to their observation about the favoring of first and second person, they argue that their pragmatic analysis based on a discourse referent and discourse participant distinction naturally explains why only first and second person reflexives have this function. That is, third person pronouns always serve as discourse referents (not discourse participants). Only first and second persons can serve as discourse referents and discourse participants (Parker et al. 1990: 62-63).⁶ As such, according to Parker et al. (1990), if the pragmatic function of unbound reflexives is to take a discourse participant (speaker/addressee) and instead represent it as a discourse referent, then this function is only viable for first and second person.⁷

2.4 Sociolinguistic corpus studies and experiment tasks

Although Parker et al. (1990) brought a spotlight to constructions with unbound reflexives, ensuing sociolinguistic research has been minimal, though informative in ways that influence the direction

6. Halliday & Hasan (1976) offer a less absolute claim about the third person, stating that, “just as the first and second person forms, while typically exophoric, may refer anaphorically, so also the third person forms, while typically anaphoric, may refer exophorically to some person or thing that is present in the context of the situation” (49), but it still holds that an exophoric third person is not the speaker/hearer.

7. I note that there is literature showing that the third person does also show semantic-pragmatic differences between personal pronoun and the reflexive pronouns, but this literature focuses on perspectival differences (Cantrall 1974; Kuno 1987; Zribi-Hertz 1989).

I take in my methodology and claims. The two most thorough variationist corpus studies that built on Parker et al. (1990) are Angermeyer & Singler (2002, 2003) and Maddeaux (2014), with Paterson (2018) conducting a more brief non-variationist corpus study.⁸ As a whole, these studies suggest that demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, class) are not prominent predictors of reflexive usage, though there are certainly nuances related to this finding, especially with respect to class. Rather, these studies find that social context is a strong predictor, and, specifically, that the reflexive correlates with formality. I review the contributions of these studies and how they inform my own subsequent research.

In a variationist corpus study of spoken American English, Angermeyer & Singler (2002, 2003) analyze instances of first person singular pronouns (*me*, *myself*, *I*) when coordinated with another NP in object position. They aim to understand how speaker demographics (sex, age, education level), social context, and language internal factors (e.g., the other NP, the following element, the case assigner) influence each variant’s frequency of usage. Their data consists of 530 tokens that they compiled from TV shows and overheard interactions in their everyday lives (primarily in their work life as professors). Accordingly, they operationalize social context in terms of type of television source and the type of overheard speech, detailed in (10) and (11).

(10) Television sources

- a. “Trash” TV guests⁹
- b. Celebrity guests (actors, musicians, politicians on talk shows)
- c. Announcers (newscasters, sportscasters, and hosts of talk shows or trash TV)
- d. Interviewees (coaches, athletes, lay people interviewed on the news or documentaries)

(11) Overheard sources

8. Additionally, Kim & Song (2024) conduct a large-scale corpus study of unbound reflexives, but it is not variationist or sociolinguistic, so I do not review it here. It suffices to note that they do illustrate that the unbound reflexives has been used consistently since the 1820s (the beginning of data availability in the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), not necessarily the date of emergence of the feature) and that it is attested in the US, Canada, Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand.

9. The authors watched shows involving “love triangles” and paid graduate students to watch Jerry Springer, Jenny Jones, Ricki Lake, Maury Povich, and Montel Williams.

- a. Meetings
- b. Work talk
- c. Conversation

They analyze this corpus of 530 tokens using GoldVarb VARBRUL, which is a type of statistical analysis that indicates how much a particular condition (e.g., male speakers) favors (i.e., increases the probable occurrence of) a particular linguistic variant, or disfavors (i.e., decreases the probable occurrence of) that variant.¹⁰ In Angermeyer & Singler (2003), they focus on analyzing how each condition influences the alternation between *me and X*, *X and me*, and *X and I*, which are structures that comprise 90% of their corpus tokens. They save discussion of structures with the reflexive (*myself and X*, *X and myself*), which comprise 10% of their tokens, for an unpublished conference paper (Angermeyer & Singler 2002). I review these papers in tandem and emphasize the finding that demographic factors are prominent predictors for use of *me* or *I*, whereas no demographic factors are statistically significant predictors for the use of the reflexive *myself*. Instead, social context is the only significant predictor of the reflexive, with formal contexts favoring the reflexive and informal contexts disfavoring the reflexive.

Beginning with Angermeyer & Singler's (2003) analysis of how demographic factors influence the use of *me and X*, *X and me*, and *X and I*, they find that speaker age and education level are significant predictors.¹¹ It is important to note that, since they are only analyzing object position, the pattern *X and me* is considered the standard, because it is prescriptively correct; *X and I* is considered the polite form because it is a prescriptively incorrect hypercorrection; and, *me and X* is considered the vernacular because it is the first structure to be acquired by children, but considered prescriptively rude. The findings, summarized in (12), demonstrate a predictable opposition

10. GoldVarb VARBRUL takes raw frequency data of the occurrence of different variants of a sociolinguistic variable and uses logistic regression to predict the probability of each variant. The goal is to understand how different factors (e.g., age, gender, token source, linguistic environment) influence the likelihood of a certain variant occurring. GoldVarb generates the overall probability that a certain variant will occur as well as factor weights – how much a particular condition increases or decreases the probability that a particular variant will occur (e.g., Considering sex as a predictor, does the probability of a particular variant occurring increase/decrease for male speakers?)

11. Speaker sex is also a significant predictor, but the results are less straightforward and Angermeyer & Singler (2003) have no explanation for them.

between the vernacular and the standard, but this opposition is complicated by the polite *X and I* – favored by those of intermediate age and education level. Angermeyer & Singler (2003) argue that the prevalence of the polite form within the college educated group is due to a convergence of prescriptive pressure and prescriptive uncertainty.

- (12)
 - a. The youngest speakers (under 25) and those with the least amount of formal education (high school) favor the vernacular (*me and X*).
 - b. Speakers intermediate in age and education level (college) favor the polite (*X and I*).
 - c. The oldest speakers (over 45) and those with the greatest amount of formal education (PhD) favor the standard (*X and me*).

For these structural variants involving *me* or *I*, Angermeyer & Singler (2003) also discuss how social context influences their usage. The favoring of a particular structure only emerges for the television data (not for the overheard sources: meetings, work talk, or conversation). More specifically, “trash” TV guests show a strong preference for the vernacular *me and X*. Angermeyer & Singler (2003: 91) suggest that the vernacular is favored because these guests are expected to have little education and the setting encourage them to be assertive and combative, which are characteristics that would be incongruous with the polite or standard form (*X and I* or *X and me*). They also find that TV celebrity guests and TV announcers both favor the polite form *X and I*, while TV interviewees do not favor a particular pattern.

In contrast to the structures involving *me* or *I* where demographic factors were strong predictors, for the reflexive variant *myself*, no demographic factors were strong predictors. That is to say, the reflexive is attested for male and female speakers, for younger, middle-aged, and older speakers, for speakers of a range of education levels, and there are not statistically significant ways in which those conditions increase/decrease the likelihood of the reflexive occurring. Instead, social context is a strong predictor, with a very consistent pattern emerging within television sources and overheard sources, which Angermeyer & Singler (2002) interpret as revealing a correlation with level of formality. Each social context is shown in Table 2.1, where the value in the “weight” column indicates how strongly a particular context favors the reflexive (increases the chances a

Social context	weight	frequency relative to <i>me/I</i>
Overheard: Meeting	.675	17%
Overheard: Work Talk	.594	7%
Overheard: Conversation	.231	5%
TV: Interviewees	.824	29%
TV: Announcers	.765	18%
TV: Celebrities	.328	4%
TV: “trash”	excluded	2%

Table 2.1: GoldVarb results for unbound reflexive, from Angermeyer & Singler (2002, 2003)

reflexive will occur) or disfavors the reflexive (decreases the chances a reflexive will occur).¹²

As shown in Table 2.1, the three types of overheard contexts (meeting, work talk, conversation) form a spectrum of formality in terms of how structured the interaction is and how work-related the topic is. The spectrum of formality corresponds neatly to how strongly the unbound reflexive is favored in meetings and work talk, but disfavored in other conversations. Based on the overheard contexts, Angermeyer & Singler (2002: 5) claim that, “there is a straightforward correlation between the use of the UR [unbound reflexive] and formality of the setting in the sense of Irvine (1979).”¹³ Furthermore, they argue that, “to some extent, that correlation carries over to the television data” (Angermeyer & Singler 2002: 5). The television sources in Table 2.1 are listed in descending order of how much a source favors the unbound reflexive, which could also be interpreted as a cline of formality. TV interviewees and announcers favor the unbound reflexive, whereas TV celebrity guests do not. Trash TV guests use the unbound reflexive so infrequently that they were excluded from this particular statistical analysis. In addition to these intriguing differences between social contexts, I would add that, although the unbound reflexive is always less frequent than *me/I*, this corpus shows some strikingly high frequencies, such as TV interviewees

12. Weights range from 0 to 1, with a weight of .5 as a neutral central value that indicates no affect (neither favoring nor disfavoring). A weight > .5 indicates favoring, while a weight < .5 indicates disfavoring.

13. They do not expand upon what they mean by this, which is somewhat confusing given that Irvine (1979) does not argue for a single sense of formality. Rather, she identifies four different aspects of formality that need not all be present and argues for the importance of defining what one means by “formality”. She does state that “the only thing all four criteria have in common is that all of them concern the degree to which a social occasion is systematically organized” (786), so I suspect this aspect is what Angermeyer & Singler (2002) are referring to.

choosing to use *myself* 29% of the time they use a 1SG pronoun in coordination in object position.

In addition to Angermeyer & Singler's (2002) major finding regarding social context (specifically, its level of formality) as a predictor of unbound reflexive usage, they also demonstrate that there is a language internal factor that greatly affects unbound reflexive usage. That is, URs strongly prefer to be coordinated with another lexical NP (rather than coordinated with another pronoun). Furthermore, by compiling a larger corpus (1,175 tokens, 15% of which were reflexives) from spoken and written data on the Internet, they find statistically significant evidence that the length of the other NP affects how likely it is for a UR to occur. The more syllables the other NP is, the more likely the 1SG pronoun will be *myself*. Similarly, when the coordinate structure contains more than just two NPs, URs are favored, such as in the examples in (13). According to Angermeyer & Singler (2002), the form *myself* allows for the 1SG to be realized in a multisyllabic form (rather than the monosyllabic *me/I*), creating more prosodic balance with a longer NP or multiple NPs.

- (13) a. In 1995 the oldest moved in with **my wife, the youngest and myself**.
 b. The, um—at at some point in 1989 did you come to a, um, conference where you sat down with, ah, **myself and H. P. Williams and Brenda Toppin and Kevin McGinnis?**

(Angermeyer & Singler 2002: 10, ex. 27)

In conclusion, Angermeyer & Singler (2002, 2003) provide the major contribution of conducting the first variationist corpus study on the 1SG unbound reflexive in coordination. By quantitatively examining how coordinate structures with *myself* behave in relation to coordinate structures with other pronoun variants (*me and X*, *X and I*, *X and me*), they show that while demographic factors strongly influence the usage of structures involving *me* versus *I*, demographic factors do not influence the usage of *myself*. Instead, social context is the only statistically significant factor that influences the usage of the UR *myself*. Most importantly, Angermeyer & Singler (2002) are the first authors to suggest that there is correlation between formality of context and the appearance of an unbound reflexive. At an even more basic level, their quantitative analysis of two large datasets,

	Singular	Plural
First person	124	3
Second Person	16	0
Third Person	1	0

Table 2.2: Distribution of URs in both corpora by person & number (Maddeaux 2014: 12)

show that the *myself*, although less common than *me* or *I*, does appear at an average frequency of 10%, with rates as high as 29% and low as 2%, depending on the social context. The social patterning further demonstrates that the unbound reflexive *myself* is not a random error. It behaves in ways that are unique from (but in relationship to) alternatives pronoun variants *me* and *I*. Not only is *myself* a socially meaningful variant, but its multi-syllabic form also makes it a linguistically favorable option when in coordination with longer or multiple NPs.

Prompted by Angermeyer & Singler's (2002) findings with regard to formality and language internal factors, Maddeaux (2014) conducts an additional variationist corpus study and two experiments. Not only does Maddeaux (2014) corroborate many of Angermeyer & Singler's (2002) findings with both corpus and experimental data, but she also expands the scope of study by analyzing all person and number forms, coordinate and single URs, and all syntactic positions, rather than the more limited scope of Angermeyer & Singler (2002) who analyze 1SG forms in coordination in object position. Beginning with her corpus research, Maddeaux (2014) analyzes two very different corpora: the Ontario English corpus,¹⁴ which contains casual speech from sociolinguistic interviews, and the Enron E-mail Dataset,¹⁵ which contains emails sent by employees of Enron Corporation. Maddeaux (2014) finds that the first person singular is the most common form of the unbound reflexive. As shown by Table 2.2, of the 144 total instances of URs across both corpora, 124 are 1SG *myself*. In fact, since the raw token count of non-1SG URs was so low, Maddeaux (2014) restricted the remainder of her analysis to 1SG pronouns for reasons of statistical validity.

14. Tagliamonte, S. (2003-2006). Linguistic changes in Canada entering the 21st century. Research grant. Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). #410-2003-0005.

15. Cohen, W. (2009, August 21). Enron E-mail Dataset. Retrieved from <https://www.cs.cmu.edu/~enron/>

After restricting her analysis to only 1SG pronouns, Maddeaux (2014) examines the relative frequency of URs as they compare to the personal pronouns (*me/I*) and how different factors influence the likelihood of a UR occurring. She limits her analysis to data from speakers for whom the unbound reflexive is a part of their repertoire. In the Ontario English corpus of 80 speakers, she identifies 21 speakers who used a UR. In the Enron email corpus of 82 email senders, she identifies 32 senders who used a UR. Based on this data, she finds that the UR was used at a rate of 10.5% in the OE corpus and at a rate of 7% in the Enron email corpus. These rates are slightly lower than the 10-15% rate of usage found by Angermeyer & Singler (2002).

Beginning with language internal factors, Maddeaux (2014) finds that URs are strongly favored in coordinated NPs. That is, a non-coordinated 1SG pronoun is unlikely to be realized as *myself*. Additionally, URs are strongly favored as oblique objects, as opposed to in subjects where URs are disfavored. These findings are unsurprising, but offer larger-scale quantitative evidence for some of the personal judgments of earlier syntacticians. Lastly, similar to Angermeyer & Singler (2002), she finds that the syllable length of the other NP affects the likelihood of a UR. The greater the number of syllables of the other NP, the more likely the speaker is to use a UR. The examples in (14) illustrate the type of examples in Maddeaux's (2014) corpora, which are 1SG reflexives coordinated with long NPs. The coordinate structures are in subject position, which is disfavored, but certainly attested.

- (14) a. **The chairman of the conservation authority and myself and the engineers** took the footbridge.
 b. Yeah so ah, **myself and some of my friends** were like, "Um, Earl Haig has this arts program and we would rather have the benefits of that than the computer program." So we ah, we dropped out.

(Ontario English corpus, Maddeaux 2014: 35)

Turning to social factors, speaker demographics were only available for the OE corpus, not the Enron email corpus. Thus, Maddeaux (2014) is more limited than Angermeyer & Singler (2002, 2003) in her ability to consider demographic factors, but she did test for the significance of speaker

sex and age in the OE corpus and found neither to be significant (Maddeaux 2014: 14, ft. 6). In sum, although Maddeaux (2014) is examining distinct corpora from Angermeyer & Singler (2002) – her spoken data is from sociolinguistic interviews in Canada and her written data is from private corporate emails – her results do align with Angermeyer & Singler (2002). She also offers the additional finding that reflexives are favored in 1SG, in coordination, and in oblique objects, which so happens to be similar to what Angermeyer & Singler restrict their analysis to.

In terms of social context and its level of formality, Maddeaux (2014) does not examine this using corpora, but rather two experiment tasks: 1) a fill-in-the-blank task where participants were given a sentence and asked to fill-in-the blank with a pronoun from a provided set of options, and 2) an acceptability judgment task where participants were provided with a complete sentence and rated it on a five-point Likert scale. The sentences were designed so that the pronoun varied in terms of person, number, syntactic position, and coordination (simple versus coordinated), and whether the sentence was casual and formal. Most relevant to the present dissertation is how she manipulates the factor of formality: “formal experimental items refer mostly to professional workplace situations. They include lexical items of a formal nature, no contractions, official titles of people mentioned, etc. Casual items refer to everyday situations and use language less associated with standard speech” (Maddeaux 2014: 23). Although Maddeaux (2014) never mentions anything about an association with professionalism, her decision to operationalize “formal” in terms of formal workplace situations suggests that perhaps she had a subconscious intuition about a stylistic association with the workplace – an association that I argue is prominent in metalinguistic commentary on the unbound reflexives.

For the fill-in-the blank task, participants were presented with items like the one in (15) and given instructions to pick whichever option they would be most likely to say or sounded most natural, rather than worrying about the kind of grammar we learn in school. Additionally, after filling in the blank, participants were asked an open-ended question about whether they thought more than one option would sound natural and if the different choices give the sentence different

meanings. In this way Maddeaux (2014) was able to elicit both quantitative data and metalinguistic commentary comparing the variants.

- (15) *Please complete the sentence using one of the following words: I, me, myself*
Please note that Professor Hannity will be out of the office on Friday, March 14. Laura Lewis and ____ will be available should you have any questions.
(Maddeaux 2014: 28)

A quantitative analysis of the fill-in-the-blank responses reveals that URs are favored in a formal register, but disfavored in a casual register (Maddeaux 2014: 27). The experiment item that elicited the highest quantity of UR responses was the one in a formal register with a 1st person oblique object in coordination, as shown in (16). Of 62 participants, 33 selected *myself* for this item, which is a remarkably high rate of nearly 50%.

- (16) Fred has been asked to proofread the proposal before sending to the client. Once he is finished, he will pass it along to Elizabeth and ____ for final approval.
(Maddeaux 2014: 28)

The metalinguistic commentary that emerged in the open-ended follow-up question also support the association between the UR and formality. Maddeaux (2014: 30) finds that 31% of participants “listed formality as a distinguishing factor in the choice between a UR and a personal pronoun”. Going beyond Maddeaux’s (2014) own analysis, I note that some participants describe a very specific type of formality. That is, they describe *myself* as “professional” and “like an office memo”. In contrast to *I* being described by many participants as natural, “myself” is an intentional choice: “the speaker is trying to be formal”. In the last excerpt, the participant attempts to distinguish between different flavors of formality, such that *I* is formal in the sense that it is prescriptively correct, nerdy, associated with school, but that *myself* is formal in its association to the upper class or a prestige variety.

- (17) a. “Myself” might seem a bit more formal [than “I”]
b. “Myself” seemed more professional, “I” more natural.
c. “I” is still most natural, “myself” sounds more like an office memo instead of some-

- one talking.
- d. I feel that “I” in this scenario is more colloquial and what I would expect to hear verbally, but “myself” is more formal and I would expect to see it written.
 - e. Using “myself” here makes it sound like the speaker is trying to be formal.
 - f. “He and I.” Formal and nerdy. “Him and myself.” Formal like we gonna meet the queen. “Me and him.” Would say it but not write it. Very casual

For the acceptability judgment task, participants were presented with 24 sentences and asked to rate each of them on a scale of 1-5. Similar to the first task, there was an open-ended question that followed the numeric rating. Participants were asked, if the sentence is not good, to explain what is bad about it and to re-write it in a way that makes it better. The quantitative analysis of the acceptability ratings corroborate the findings of the fill-in-the-blank task: UR are favored in formal sentences. That is, a UR is more likely to be rated as acceptable in formal experiment items than casual experiment items. The open-ended responses elicited metalinguistic commentary that also supports an association with formality. Most interestingly, the acceptability ratings and the metalinguistic commentary analyzed together show that even participants who do not accept the reflexive still perceive an association with formality. According to Maddeaux (2014), “even when participants do not accept the UR, they still attend to the notion of its elevated formality” (33). A participant who gave an acceptability rating of 1 to a sentence with a UR, wrote: “feels pretentious an overly formal when I say it out loud”. Another participant who gave an acceptability rating of 2 to a sentence with a UR, wrote “it feels overly formal for me to say this”.

In addition to the participants who reject the UR but still interpret it as formal, there are also participants who actually find the UR to be more acceptable than *me* or *I*. That is, for certain experiment tokens that contained *me* or *I*, some participants judged the sentences as bad and offered a correction involving *myself*. Ten participants (out of 62) rejected the prescriptively correct phrase “between Councillor Brandheim and me” in example (18) and suggested it be replaced with “between Councillor Brandheim and myself.” Two participants rejected the hypercorrect phrase “with Casey and I” in (19) and suggested that it be replaced with “with Casey and myself”.

- (18) The following statement describes the incident that occurred between Councillor Brandheim and me.
Suggested fix: ...between Councillor Brandheim and myself.
- (19) She requested that he schedule a meeting with Casey and I.
Suggested fix: ...with Casey and myself.

Maddeaux's (2014) acceptability judgment task, thus, contributes far more than simply indicating that an UR is most acceptable in 1SG, in coordination, as an oblique object, and in formal contexts. She demonstrates that participants exhibit a range of acceptability ratings for URs, but even when participants do not accept an UR, "they retain the same intuitions about its inherent formality" (Maddeaux 2014: 34). Additionally, participants' awareness of the linguistic and social factors that favor URs is highly conscious, as some participants offer *myself* as a more acceptable alternative to *me* and *I* for certain experiment tokens. Thus, not only does Maddeaux (2014) corroborate Angermeyer & Singler's (2002) hypothesis regarding the relevance of formality, but her language production (fill-in-the-blank) and language perception (acceptability judgment) experiment tasks introduces preliminary data showing how speakers themselves conceptualize of *myself* and negotiate its robust position among its siblings *me* and *I*. This research supports a view of the UR as a socially meaningful variant that speakers wield with agency, but, with formality as a starting point, much remains to be understood about how it is deployed in local contexts and how it is conceptualized in the public imagination.

The final corpus study with relevance to my dissertation is a non-variationist study by Paterson (2018) who extracts tokens of reflexives from an early access sample of the spoken BNC2014 (British National Corpus), which contains data from 380 speakers in casual conversations with friends and family, so it is not possible to compare reflexive usage across contexts. Casual conversations are also not a context that I would expect to find many unbound reflexives. Additionally, her study is not variationist because she does not extract tokens of alternative pronoun variants (e.g., *I/me*, *you*, *he/him*, etc.), rather she focuses only on reflexive pronouns of all person and number. Although her study does not inform our understanding of the factors that influence the alternation

between the reflexive and personal pronouns, it does show that the UR is most common in the first person singular *myself* and that the demographic factors of age, sex, and region do not correlate with UR reflexive, but that social class does reveal some interesting patterns.¹⁶

From the BNC14S, Paterson (2018) finds 2,825 total reflexive tokens and categorizes 57 as unbound reflexives reflexives. Those 57 tokens come from from 38 speakers. In analyzing these 57 unbound reflexives, it is noteworthy that about 52% are *myself* and 28% are *yourself*. The remainder of the unbound reflexives consist of just a few of tokens of *yourselves*, *himself*, *herself*, *itself*, and *themselves*. This distribution supports the previous research suggesting that 1SG is the most common form, with the 2SG being less common but more robustly attested than all other forms (Maddeaux 2014).

Paterson (2018) also analyzes how these unbound reflexives are distributed with respect to the speaker attributes of location,¹⁷ sex, age, and social class. She finds that “their use does not appear to correlate with a particular location and/or a geographically-dialect” (Paterson 2018: 246). There are such limited correlations with sex and age that these also do not seem to be relevant predictors of unbound reflexive usage. Regarding social class, Paterson (2018) operationalizes this in terms of occupation type, as this data was available for the BNC and there is an established social grade system widely used in the United Kingdom. Social grade A, B, and C1 are comprised of white collar occupations: higher, intermediate, and junior managerial roles, respectively. C2 and D are comprised of skilled manual workers and semi-skilled manual workers. Paterson (2018) finds that the unbound reflexive tokens were uttered primarily by speakers of social grade A and B. In fact, none of the 57 tokens were uttered by manual workers (levels C2 and D). Paterson (2018) also looks at even more specifically at speakers’ employment type and finds that of the 38 speakers who use unbound reflexives, 19 of them either work (or have worked) in education or are students.

In sum, while Paterson (2018) did not find the demographic factors of sex, age, and location

16. I do not know if the corpus was balanced for these demographic factors.

17. Location refers to regions in the United Kingdom.

to be relevant predictors, unbound forms “appeared to cluster in higher social classes and amongst those involved with education (although it is notable that speakers ranged from high-school students to PhD students and teachers)” (Paterson 2018: 252). In discussing these findings, she remarks on the puzzling nature of a feature that is prescriptively incorrect and yet used by higher social classes. She interprets this contradiction as indicating that the unbound reflexive cannot actually be associated with higher social classes or prestige (Paterson 2018: 248). I interpret this contradiction differently. That is, prescriptive correctness should not *a priori* determine our conclusions about stylistic associations of a feature. Thus, throughout this dissertation, I consider this seeming contradiction as the beginning of a complex story, not a dead end. Nevertheless, I do share in Paterson’s dissatisfaction with demographic factors’ ability to meaningfully illuminate what influences the use of unbound reflexives (Paterson 2018: 250). In response to her dissatisfaction, Paterson (2018) suggests that future research should examine their discourse function, as she notices some loose patterns related to the speaker being part of a group, playing a role in the narrative, and being affected by someone else’s action. Most notably, she has an intuition similar to Parker et al.’s (1990) claim regarding the reflexive as a form self-reference that emphasizes a discourse referent role rather than a speaker role. Analyzing the example in (20), she states that “*myself* is used in its untriggered form to suggest disassociation between the speaker and the real world referent” (Paterson 2018: 251).

- (20) a. the internal voice that makes excuses for myself (BNC2014 S9EP)

2.5 Moving forward

Previous syntax research did not dedicate focused attention to the type of socially marked constructions that this dissertation focuses on, though it did demonstrate an awareness of their existence and alluded to some type of social or prescriptive markedness. Research inspired by Parker et al.’s (1990) spotlight of real-world examples containing unbound reflexives in coordination has made the following main contributions. First, unbound reflexives are most common as the 1SG *myself*

and in coordinate structures (Parker et al. 1990; Maddeaux 2014; Paterson 2018). Second, most demographic factors are not prominent predictors of unbound reflexive usage (Angermeyer & Singler 2002; Maddeaux 2014; Paterson 2018), though social class (specifically, employment type) may be a relevant factor (Paterson 2018). Third, unbound reflexives are more common in a formal register of speech (Angermeyer & Singler 2002; Maddeaux 2014). Fourth, the unbound reflexive has discourse pragmatic functions, one of which is related to highlighting a discourse referent role rather than a discourse participant role (Parker et al. 1990; Paterson 2018).

In the present dissertation, I use methodologies that diverge from those that have been utilized in prior research, which will enable us to understand the social meaning of the reflexive from angles that have yet to be explored. For example, aside from Maddeaux's (2014) acceptability judgment task, previous research has focused on language production rather than language perception. As such, I begin by focusing on language perception in two ways that differ from an acceptability judgment task. First, I analyze metalinguistic commentary on the unbound reflexive in order to understand the way the feature is perceived and constructed in the public imagination. Second, I conduct a perception experiment that reveals how the choice of pronoun variant shapes perceptions of the speaker in a localized context. I use the 1SG in coordination in my experiment stimulus because previous research shows that 1SG is the most common unbound reflexive and it is most acceptable in coordination. I also analyze language production, but, since the existing research has primarily examined language production through quantitative analyses of corpora,¹⁸ I do a qualitative analysis of only a few examples that I have selected from widely circulated TV shows, allowing for detailed analysis of the context and character construction. These methodologies that I pursue are well-suited to examine social meaning in a way that shifts focus away from quantitative analysis of speaker demographics, which has been examined in prior research and found to be less relevant than social context. A third-wave stylistic approach to social meaning is illuminating

18. Maddeaux (2014) does also examine language production through her fill-in-the-blank task and Parker et al. (1990) and Paterson (2018) do some limited pragmatic analyses of individual examples, but without intensive examination of the full context.

for any sociolinguistic variable, even those that are socially stratified, but the unbound reflexive presents an opportunity to investigate a variable that does not have strong demographic correlates. Its social meaning does not seem to have its beginnings as an n-th order indexical (Silverstein 2003) or as an indicator (Labov 1972a). In this way, this feature is like affective demonstratives which are a widely used stylistic resource whose social meaning does not have its origins in socially stratified language variation (Acton & Potts 2014).

CHAPTER 3

METALINGUISTIC PERCEPTIONS: LET RIP WITH THE ‘SELVES’

3.1 Introduction

Writing in their blog *Grammarphobia*, authors O’Conner and Kellerman give one perspective on the unbound reflexive, that it reveals a weak grasp of English grammar:

“Wendy and myself will plan the party” or “The bank sold the house to my husband and myself.” Sentences like those reveal a weak grasp of English.

(*Grammarphobia*, 16 April 2013)

Although this 2013 blog post reflects a prescriptivist view of language, O’Conner and Kellerman see themselves as myth busters who take a dynamic approach to language rules. Their popular books and blog aim to lay to rest the “bogus or worn-out rules [that] have a way of coming back to haunt us” and teach readers that “sometimes an ancient prohibition becomes outdated, or it may turn out that a musty convention was never really a rule at all”.¹ In this vein, their personal view of the unbound reflexive changes from 2013 to 2018, when they write an updated blog post:

We suspect that some people fall back on “myself” when they’re unsure whether “I” or “me” would be grammatically correct. However, there’s nothing grammatically wrong with using “myself” and other reflexive pronouns more expansively for euphony, style, rhythm, and so on. Respected writers have done just that for centuries, both before and after the language gurus raised objections.

(*Grammarphobia*, 27 August 2018)

Although this expanded view seems more descriptive in its myth busting, it actually draws a pernicious distinction between two groups of people: 1) “some people” — those with a weak grasp of grammar who use the reflexive due to uncertainty, versus 2) “respected writers” and the

1. O’Conner, Patricia & Kellerman, Stewart. n.d. “Language Myths: The Living Dead”. *Grammarphobia*, <https://www.grammarphobia.com/grammar-html> (Accessed 14 March 2026).

like — those with a strong grasp of grammar who use the reflexive stylistically. Here, descriptivism and prescriptivism are not mutually exclusive, but rather intertwined and jointly leveraged to degrade some speakers but applaud others. As suggested by Cameron (1995), descriptivism and prescriptivism are not the absolute binary opposition that linguists often take them to be.

Similar to the trajectory of their blog posts on the unbound reflexive, in the 1996 edition of her book *Woe Is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English*, O'Connor writes a section called "The Sins of the Self-ish" in which she states that the unbound reflexive is incorrect and refers to the use of "*myself* and the rest of the *self*-ish crew" as "*self*-promotion" (1996: 13).² In the 2019 fourth edition of this book, she changes the section title to "Self Denial" and modifies her position on its correctness: "well, it's not grammatically wrong, but I don't recommend this *self*-promotion" (2019: 15). Not only does this commentary demonstrate that debates about the unbound reflexive are alive in prescriptivist circles, the phrases "*self*-promotion" and "*self*-ish crew" draw an interpretive connection between the form of this pronoun and social qualities.

The excerpts above from O'Connor and Kellerman's blog and book show that people are eager to not just opine on whether a linguistic feature is correct or not, but to weigh in on the *who* and *why* of the feature. *Who* uses this feature? *Why* do people use it? These impressionistic reports of language usage are not always empirically accurate, but just as gossip or folktales are not necessarily historically accurate reports of events, these are all social practices that reveal who we imagine ourselves to be and who we imagine others to be. "Talk about talk" — metalinguistic commentary — is a way in which people circulate their ideas about specific ways of speaking (Johnstone, Andrus & Danielson 2006). By analyzing metalinguistic commentary, we can better understand how the unbound reflexive is characterized in the social imagination.

In this chapter, I conduct a qualitative analysis of Internet metalinguistic commentary (henceforth, metacommentary) as a means of investigating the unbound reflexive's enregisterment with particular speech styles and its other indexical links. Enregisterment refers to "processes and prac-

2. O'Connor, Patricia T. 1996/2019. *Woe Is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English*, 4th edn. Penguin Publishing House.

tices whereby performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population” (Agha 2007: 81).³ Indexical links refer to the contextually flexible social meanings (i.e., social identities, abstract qualities, stances) that are associated with a linguistic feature and that language users engage with ideologically (Silverstein 2003; Eckert 2008). More broadly, indexicality refers to the way a linguistic sign comes to point to an object of the social world through co-occurrence of the sign and object in a context (Peirce 1955; Jakobson 1957; Silverstein 1976). Metacommentary is one site in which processes of enregisterment and the ideological negotiation of indexical links can occur. Therefore, metacommentary is not merely a data source; it is itself a mechanism through which social meaning is created, interpreted, debated, and circulated (Agha 2005, 2007). The metacommentary I analyze in this chapter thus simultaneously reveals and shapes people’s beliefs about who uses the unbound reflexive, why they use it, and why the form of the reflexive as two syllables is interpreted as socially significant.

The Internet is a prominent and expansive space for public discourse, thus it is a rich data source for publicly available metacommentary on the unbound reflexive. There are online articles dedicated to scrutinizing the unbound reflexive, from high-readership media outlets (e.g., New York Times, Financial Times), to smaller grammar enthusiast blogs (e.g., Grammarphobia, LanguageLog), to the language “authority” Merriam-Webster. Some articles have also prompted impassioned dialogue in the user comments, a space many people use to anonymously air their grievances. Across these sources, people present a variety of different, sometimes opposing, viewpoints. The existence of this commentary on the unbound reflexive shows that the feature has reached a level of macro-social salience such that it is socio-culturally meaningful and recognizable for many language users. Simply put, this is a feature people think is worth talking about and having opinions about beyond just stating whether it is “correct” or “incorrect”.

My data consists of small selection of Internet posts from between 2011-2023 that were pub-

3. I treat style as a type of semiotic register, since “the targets of enregisterment can also be registers associated with styles, personas, times, activities, individuals, or any other culturally relevant category of people or events, and a linguistic act can enregister linguistic features with multiple contexts” (Johnstone 2016: 635).

licly available at the time of data collection. These 12 posts are given in Table 3.1 and represent a variety of genres: newspapers, a dictionary website, some writing advice posts, some blogs, a social media post, and a Q&A forum. Additionally, four of these posts also include user comments: the Financial Times, NYT Opinion, LanguageLog, and Stack Exchange. I selected about 60 user comments on these posts, containing a range of perspectives. Anonymous comments allow people to quickly express their immediate reactions without the need to curate their writing. In contrast, in the long-form posts, authors are typically writing non-anonymously to a specific audience, in a specific publication, and have more carefully constructed an argument.⁴

The data in this chapter is not exhaustive of all Internet metacommentary on the feature, because I aim to do a close-reading of a small selection rather than a corpus analysis of a larger set of data. I have still sought to capture a range of perspectives, though these perspectives are necessarily limited to people who decide to post publicly on the Internet about the reflexive. Although I did not limit my search to only unbound *myself* in coordination, across the metacommentary, coordination emerges as the most salient construction involving the unbound reflexive, primarily *myself* in coordination but also *yourself* in coordination. A few posts and user comments do discuss non-coordinated constructions, especially the use of non-coordinated *yourself* in polite statements and questions (e.g., “Does that work for yourself?”). The saliency landscape that emerges in the metacommentary thus aligns with the findings of the corpus studies reviewed in Chapter 2.

4. When citing the Internet data, I use the citation code in Table 3.1. When quoting a user comment, I cite the username, using the format FTcomment.username, NYTcomment.username, or LLcomment.username, SEcomment.username.

Genre	Website	Title	Author	Code
Newspapers	Financial Times	Me, myself and I are all annoyed at pronoun misuse. People who invite ‘yourself’ to a meeting are reviving a centuries-old irritation	Skapinker 2018	FT
	New York Times Opinion	England’s Reflexive Pronoun Epidemic	Cohen 2016	NYT opinion
	Slate	Are You Using Myself Correctly? The Fantastic Flexibility of the Reflexive Pronoun.	Harbeck 2014	Slate
Dictionary	Merriam-Webster Usage Notes	Putting ‘Myself’ Where ‘Me’ or ‘I’ Usually Goes	unknown	M-W
Writing Advice	Instructional Solutions	Me, Myself, and I - Business Grammar Rules Explained	Cullen 2023	IS
	North Dakota State University	Write the Right Word: Me, Myself and I	Crawford 2019	NDSU
Blogs	Common Errors in English Usage	i/me/myself	Brians 2013	Brians
	Grammarphobia	Myself abuse	O’Conner & Kellerman 2013	GP 2013
	Grammarphobia	Me, myself and I	O’Conner & Kellerman 2018	GP 2018
	LanguageLog	Alleged misuse of reflexive pronouns	Lieberman 2015	LangLog
Social Media	Facebook post	MORE RANDOM THOUGHTS AT 3AM	Brothersen 2020	FB
Q&A forum	Stack Exchange	Use of “myself” in business-speak	mshfisher 2011	SE

Table 3.1: Metacommentary data sources

In my analysis of these data sources, I argue that the metacommentary reveals an enregistered association with a professional style of speech, specifically one that is attributed to the business, finance, and corporate world. Although this style speech is seen as formal and typical of workplaces that tend to be associated with capitalism, economic prestige, and educational attainment, commenters grapple with the tension of linking a prescriptively incorrect feature to a formal speech style. I delve into this tension by examining how the prescriptive incorrectness of the feature affects commenters' criticisms of people who use this feature. For example, while the feature is attributed to uneducated people, educated people, and even respected literary figures, only the respected literary figures are exempt from the barrage of prescriptive criticism.

The metacommenters are also very focused on theorizing why people use the reflexive. There are two contrasting, but not mutually exclusive, narratives about why people use the feature: moving away from other variants or moving towards specific social meanings. On the one hand, metacommenters portray people as motivated to use the reflexive as a way to avoid using alternatives like *me* or *I*, because speakers are insecure about choosing the correct alternative. On the other hand, metacommenters portray people as motivated to use the reflexive as a way to convey social meanings ranging from politeness to self-importance.

The metacommentary is also illuminating of how people rationalize certain social meanings through iconic interpretations of the reflexive's form. Iconicity — perceived natural resemblances between form and meaning (Peirce 1955) — is integral to how commenters rationalize their perceptions of the social meaning of the unbound reflexive. I focus on how commenters construct a short–long distinction that contrasts the forms *me/I/you* with the forms *myself/yourself* and how this formal distinction is mapped onto a social distinction of plain–excessive and direct–indirect. Excessive effort is one of the variety of ways that excess is interpreted in the metacommentary. The excessive effort of some speakers is perceived as exposing an inauthentic portrayal of the self, which is a perception that can be captured by Acton's (2022) framework for understanding the connection between intention and listener evaluations of social meaning.

3.2 Metacommentary in the field of sociolinguistics

This chapter's focus on metacommentary is responsive to calls within the field of sociolinguistics to pay attention to this type of data that was once undervalued in sociolinguistics, despite anthropological work demonstrating that it is an important lens for analyzing the ideologies through which speakers construct and interpret an idealized link between linguistic features and social identities (Agha 2005, 2007; Silverstein 2003).

A push for sociolinguists to pay more attention to metacommentary is made by Johnstone et al. (2006) who examine the role of metapragmatic practices in the enregisterment of the Pittsburghese:

Sociolinguists interested in understanding patterns of variation and change in the speech community need to pay attention not just to people's talk but to the metapragmatic activities in which they create and circulate ideas about how they talk.

(Johnstone et al. 2006: 99)

Metapragmatic activities create and circulate ideas about ways of speech by signaling the appropriateness and effectiveness of a particular speech form in a particular context (Silverstein 2003; Johnstone et al. 2006). Metacommentary is a type of metapragmatic activity that requires speakers to have a conscious awareness of a feature and its social meaning, such that they can articulate commentary about a speech form itself.⁵

Similar to Johnstone et al. (2006), Dorleijn & Nortier (2019) call attention to the issue that metacommentary has had only a marginal role in sociolinguistics:

Variationist sociolinguists tend to analyze *linguistic* data, obtained through data collection methods such as sociolinguistic interviews. This does not mean that metalinguistic comments are completely ignored, but their role in the analyses is marginal.

(Dorleijn & Nortier 2019: 283)

The marginal role of metacommentary in sociolinguistics is not an accident. Traditional variationist

5. Not all metapragmatic activities involve explicit metacommentary. For example, the use of Received Pronunciation by presenters on the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) implicitly signals that RP is an appropriate style of speech for contexts of national prestige in Britain (Johnstone et al. 2006: 80).

sociolinguistics tended to intentionally abstain from including metacommentary due to methodological problems of validity and reliability (Kristiansen 2004: 187).

The belief that metacommentary is unreliable is not surprising when considering the goals and methods of variationist sociolinguistic work in the 1960s. This work aims to quantify and describe variation in natural speech. The sociolinguistic interview is the main method of data-collection in variationist sociolinguistics (Schilling 2013: 92). These interviews traditionally contain a conversational portion, a reading passage, and a word list. Even in the conversational portion, the goal is not to talk about language; rather, “interviewers seek to draw attention away from speech by encouraging interviewees to talk about topics of great interest to them. Interview questions are purposefully designed to steer attention away from language itself toward topics of interest to interviewees” (Schilling 2013: 13). These interviews elicit natural speech in order to collect information on how something is said, rather than the content of what is said.

Although sociolinguistic interviews tend to direct attention away from any metalinguistic awareness, early sociolinguists did sometimes collect self-reports of language use. For self-reports, linguists explicitly ask a speaker if they use a feature, how often, and in what contexts they use it. This data was not used as an opportunity to investigate attitudes and ideologies. Rather, the goal was to collect accurate quantitative information about language use. However, this methodology proved to be unsuitable for this goal, because “people’s reports of their linguistic usage may or may not match up with what they actually do” (Schilling 2014: 102). This limitation is empirically well-evidenced: foundational work has shown self-reports to be inaccurate, because when asked to report their usage of a particular feature, participants often over- or under-report their frequency of usage (Labov 1966; Trudgill 1972). That said, despite the inaccuracy of self-reports, Labov and Trudgill do mention the potential usefulness of self-reports for understanding language attitudes:

In the conscious report of their own usage, however, New York respondents are very inaccurate. There is little correlation between their self-evaluation and their use of the five variables, in any style. Nevertheless, we can learn a great deal about attitudes towards the variables from these reports. [...] We shall see that when average New Yorkers report their own usage, they are basically giving us their norms of correctness.

(Labov 1966: 455)⁶

Favourable attitudes to non-standard speech are not normally expressed, however, and emerge only in inaccurate self-evaluation test responses.

(Trudgill 1972: 179)

Other early sociolinguists have dismissed metacommentary for exploring language attitudes beyond prescriptivism. Milroy & Milroy (1991) find metacommentary useful for identifying popular attitudes of prescriptivism, but they dismiss the usefulness of metacommentary for understanding what they refer to as the private views that ordinary people have:

It seems to be virtually impossible to rely on speakers' reports of their own usage or of their attitudes to usage, so that we cannot easily find out what people actually think. [...] In fact, statistical counts of variants actually used are probably the best way of assessing attitudes.

(Milroy & Milroy 1991: 18-19)

Milroy & Milroy (1991) are concerned that people might not be sharing what they “actually think” when reporting their attitudes. Indeed, language users are highly aware of their audience and may report their opinions differently based on the research environment (e.g., the identity of the researcher in an interview) or the context of a natural environment (e.g., anonymous online forum, private conversation with a friend, a public space). However, analyzing metacommentary is not intended to be a mind-reading of static attitudes, but rather a way to investigate the complexity of language ideologies⁷ and how people choose to articulate their attitudes in specific spaces.

In contrast to the many early sociolinguists who focused on the limitations of self-reports due to their inaccuracy, Preston embraced metacommentary in his dialectology work beginning in the late 1960s. Preston (2004) emphasizes that metacommentary is valuable, regardless of whether the metacommentary aligns with the observations of linguists. A perspective that is articulated similarly by Silverstein (1979).

6. This excerpt appears on pg. 455 of the original 1966 book, *The social stratification of English in New York City*, and on pg. 300 of the second edition published in 2006.

7. Language ideologies can be defined as “any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein 1979: 193).

Whatever the result of a comparison between folk and scientific categorization [...] (that is, whatever the level of scientific accuracy of the folk comment), the folk belief is by no means diminished as an object of research.

(Preston 2004: 82)

If we compare such ideologies with what goes under the name of “scientific” statements about language, we might find that in certain areas the ideological beliefs do in fact match the scientific ones, though the two will, in general, be part of divergent larger systems of discourse and enterprise. We need have no conceit one way or the other, however, that automatically privileges so-called “scientific” descriptions, or automatically condemns native ideological rationalization.

(Silverstein 1979: 193)

Thus, it is not new for sociolinguists to analyze metacommentary. It was long seen as valuable by Preston and acknowledged as potentially useful by Trudgill and Labov, but repeated descriptions of its inaccuracy still led to its diminished role in sociolinguistic methods. In tandem with theoretical shifts in the field, sociolinguistic methods have evolved over time. The field of sociolinguistics now recognizes that a researcher should not be “armed only with a telescope and a remote listening device”, but must also use diverse methodology to “understand what people know and are aware of” (Rickford, in Babel 2016: xiii). With the rise of the digital age, it is also now much easier to collect metacommentary without needing to do sociolinguistic interviews or conduct surveys in person. In devoting this chapter to metacommentary, I not only gain important perspectives on attitudes towards this linguistic feature, but also contribute to the methodological push for sociolinguistics to incorporate more diverse methods.

3.3 A professional workplace speech style

Across the metacommentary, it is very common for commenters to mention encountering the unbound reflexive in the workplace. In addition to this general association with the workplace, there is a specific association with the corporate world of business, finance, or sales. There are also some mentions of other prestigious white-collar domains of work, such as academia and the courtroom. In this section, I claim that the unbound reflexive is enregistered with a professional speech style.

The link between the unbound reflexive and a professional style is prominent in two articles which are situated in the business world. It is not simply the content of these articles that suggest a link to business, but also the type of publication and audience. The first article comes from a well-known newspaper, the Financial Times, which defines itself as “the world’s leading global business publication”. Although this is a business publication, it is read more widely than just business circles. The article, “Me, myself and I are all annoyed at pronoun misuse”, appears in a series on grammar that also contains articles about hyper-correction, language variation between social groups, and language change over history. The article opens with the passage in (1), giving two examples that show the feature’s noticeable presence in a business workplace.

- (1) An invitation arrives to an investment bank’s breakfast roundtable. “Do let myself or my colleague know if you would like to attend,” the email says.

“I’d be delighted to set up a phone call between yourself and Matt,” says another message from a press officer trying to interest me in an interview. (FT)

In contrast to the Financial Times, the second article published in a business related source is from a small company called Instructional Solutions, which describes itself as a business writing company that provides writing courses. The company’s use of the terms “business writing”, “business grammar”, and “business English” shows that there is a recognizable genre with its own stylistic norms (and one you can be explicitly enculturated into via these training courses). That is, business English is about more than just conforming to prescriptive grammar. One article on their website, “Top 40 Business English Idioms (and those you should avoid)”, indicates that this genre has its own nameable linguistic features, which tend to be specific jargon and phrases, rather than phonetic or grammatical features. However, the reflexive pronoun receives its own dedicated article titled “Me, Myself, and I - Business Grammar Rules Explained”, which opens by stating:

- (2) Me, Myself, and I errors are one of the most common business grammar errors we see in business writing training sessions. (IS)

The article provides the sentence, “Please send the report to Karen and myself”, as an example of this error. In order to teach readers how to avoid this error, the article gives rules about the use of the nominative in subject position and the accusative in object position, but struggles to give a clear rule for the reflexive pronoun:

- (3) The reflexive personal pronoun *myself* gets tricky, but just remember that *myself* is always used as the object of a sentence and/or as an intensive pronoun to add intensity to a sentence. Myself is **never** used as a subject pronoun. (IS)

Ironically, the assertion that “myself is **never** used as a subject pronoun” (emphasis original) suggests that the reflexive is commonly used as a subject pronoun, but is prescriptively incorrect.

In addition to the Financial Times article and the Instructional Solutions post, there are user comments which reveal an association with professional workplaces. In (4a), the commenter not only attributes the feature to car salesmen, but describes a business transaction where the salesman is perceived to be using the reflexive as part of a servile discursive style that helps achieve their transactional goal. In (4b), the commenter expresses annoyance at the use of reflexives by people working in customer service and uses terms related to business like *form* and *invoice*. In (4c), the commenter makes a more general link to American corporate life.

- (4) a. The worst culprits are car leasing salesmen when they are being unusually obsequious. (FTcomment.Greedy Brits)
- b. I have no problem with “like herself”, but something that does bother me (and which might have been the source of some of the readers’ complaints) is the tendency of people working in customer service to use reflexive pronouns all over the place, like “Please return the form to myself” or “We will send the invoice to yourself”. (LLcomment.Rachaell)
- c. The reflexive pronoun is alive and well in American corporate life. (NYTcomment.Short girl)

While the comments above point directly to the business world, there are also comments that mention other professions. In the comments in (5), people mention scientists, a judge and attorney, police officers, and military members. These professions are not narrowly considered to be part

of the business world, but they are still white-collar domains of work that are associated with similar cultures of professionalism. Additionally, some of these comments call attention to the tension between formality and prescriptive incorrectness. According to the commenter in (5c), this unbound reflexive is “regularly adopted in specific formalized settings, but that does not make it grammatically correct”.

- (5) a. In interviews, I hear scientists frequently saying something like “My colleagues and myself published on that topic in 2012.”
(LLcomment.Stephen Hart)
- b. And it’s not just the kids: At jury duty a few years ago, I had the painful experience of hearing both the judge and the defense attorney address potential jurors with expressions like “the judge and myself believe...”
(NYTcomment.Karen Berlin Ishii)
- c. It seems to me that myself has taken root in particular settings. For example, almost any time I read or hear a police report or officer talking, they use *Myself* instead of *Me* or *I*. I sometimes wonder if they are trained to do so, it seems so ubiquitous. I think it is used a lot by some military people as well. So it seems it is regularly adopted in specific formalized settings, but that does not make it a grammatically correct formal usage.
(SEcomment.Dennis Hicks)

Finally, a post on Stack Exchange titled “Use of *myself* in business-speak” makes an explicit link between the unbound reflexive and the widely-recognized term “business-speak”. A commenter on this post also uses the term “business-ese”. The use of these terms demonstrates that the unbound reflexive is not just found in the workplace, but it is associated with nameable linguistic repertoires. I use the term professional style rather than business-speak/business-ese, because I think it more fully captures the breadth of this speech style and the social qualities associated with professional culture, whereas business-speak and business-ese often more narrowly refer to corporate jargon. Fittingly, in this Stack Exchange post, the author writes that, when they hear or read coworkers using *myself* instead of *me*, it “seems like an attempt to sound more professional”. This type of comment also reveals that the unbound reflexive’s association with professionalism involves a perception of effort and striving to sound a certain way.

In sum, the unbound reflexive is enregistered with a professional speech style. Although this

style is considered formal and used in domains often associated with economic or institutional prestige, commenters are not necessarily in favor of its use. The Financial Times article does not prescribe against the feature, but describes it as annoying. The Instructional Solutions post prescribes against it. Some individuals in the user comments are bothered (4b) or pained by it (5b). These comments illustrate how public discourse grapples with the paradox of a prescriptively incorrect linguistic feature that is associated with a formal style. The tension that arises from a feature perceived to be both formal and incorrect is relevant to my subsequent analysis of commenters' diverse and often contrasting opinions about who uses the feature and why they use it. Additionally, the feature's connection to corporate life, which is highly transactional and for monetary gain, is relevant to my analysis of perceptions of reflexive-users lack of authenticity.

3.4 Who is perceived to use the unbound reflexive?

Commenters do not present themselves as users of the reflexive, but rather as people who read it and hear it. Many commenters also present themselves as knowing better than to use an incorrect feature, thereby positioning themselves as superior to those who use the unbound reflexive. In order to position themselves above who they are critiquing, commenters occasionally invoke the social hierarchy of age, but more ubiquitously invoke the social hierarchy of education-level. That said, they do not uniformly consider users of the reflexive to be young, nor do they uniformly consider users of the reflexive to be uneducated. Rather, as commenters discuss the use of the feature by a range of people, there are distinct flavors of criticism towards speakers of different social statuses. This section does not posit a clear demographic picture of who the commenters are or who the reflexive-users are. Instead, I illuminate how age and education-level is invoked by commenters as they try to make sense of a formal yet prescriptively incorrect linguistic feature and how standard language ideology is embedded in their discourse.

3.4.1 Age

Since the feature is enregistered with a professional style, it is implied that this feature is associated with those of working age. There are minimal comments with explicit mentions of age, but some commenters do attribute the feature to young adults and, based on their critical tone, commenters leverage age as a way to establish themselves as socially superior to those who use the reflexive. In (6a), the commenter references his younger colleagues and how he is driven crazy by their use of the reflexive. In (6b), the commenter opens with, “And it’s not just the kids”. This commenter does dislike when young people use the feature, but it is more painful to her when she hears it from a judge and attorney. By attributing the feature to both “the kids” and older educated professionals like herself, the commenter criticizes the judge/attorney on the basis that they should know better than those “kids” (high schoolers) with bad grammar.⁸

- (6) a. When I’m on a conference call with my younger colleagues, it drives me crazy when they are afraid to use the word “me”.
(NYTcomment.Richard garms)
- b. And it’s not just the kids: At jury duty a few years ago, I had the painful experience of hearing both the judge and the defense attorney address potential jurors with expressions like “the judge and myself believe...”
(NYTcomment.Karen Berlin Ishii)

The final comment that leverages age in its criticism comes from a Facebook post that reproduces the language ideology that young people are corrupting language. In (7), the poster expresses nostalgia for a time when people spoke “words” instead of using linguistic innovations. He then lists his grammatical and moral complaints, which include *myself* in subject position. He argues that “we old folks” can look back fondly on a time when language and society were not corrupted, but the young people will not have anything to look back on since proper language and traditional values have been lost. Thus, the poster uses age to position his generation as not just grammatically superior, but also morally superior.

8. Karen Berlin Ishii is an SAT/ACT prep tutor, so I assume that she has high schoolers in mind when referring to “the kids” and that she sees herself as well-versed in prescriptive grammar.

- (7) I miss the days when people spoke words not abbreviations, acronyms, slang or hieroglyphics modernized, colorized and renamed emojis.
[...]
We old folks can look back at the “good old days” with some fond memories. I fear for what the kids today have to look forward to if, as the song says, “These are the good old days”
(FB)

3.4.2 Education-level

While discourse on speakers’ age is limited, it is common for commenters to remark on speakers’ social status as it relates to the realm of education-level, intelligence, and class. These characteristics are not one and the same, but for simplicity of terminology, I use the terms uneducated and educated, with the understanding that commenters are not narrowly talking about a person’s degree level, but rather the associations of intelligence, knowledge of prescriptive grammar, prestige, and class. These associations also demonstrate the way that education-level is conflated with intelligence. In analyzing the dual association with both uneducated and educated speakers, I show that, while both groups are criticized for their grammar errors, uneducated speakers receive harsh criticism suggesting that a single grammatical error is revealing of mental deficiencies. In contrast, educated speakers receive more mild criticism that positions a single grammatical error as a mistake that is at odds with their education-level. Exceptionally, there is one special group of educated people — respected writers and historical figures — who is exempt from criticism and is instead applauded for their stylistic creativity in using the unbound reflexive. These social judgments, whether critique or praise, can be understood as rooted in a standard language ideology that elevates the social, intellectual, and linguistic status of the educated class, especially those with high skill in the written language (Lippi-Green 1993).

3.4.2.1 Standard language ideology

Standard language ideologies emerge strongly in the commentary, specifically in terms of how the quality of one’s grammar is perceived to be reflective of the quality of one’s education and

intelligence. The idealized version of speech that is considered “the standard” is conceptualized as belonging to the educated: “the social domain of the standard has been established: it is the language of the educated, in particular those who have achieved a high level of skill with the written language” (Lippi-Green 1993: 59). The perceived superiority of written language over spoken language contributes to the privileged status of educated speech:

‘Persons with more education are more exposed to the written language and literary traditions; they may, in simple terms, be better writers than those with less education. Why this should mean that their pronunciation and syntax are somehow more informed, more genuine, more authoritative? – that is never made clear.

(Lippi-Green 1993: 58)

By conflating written and spoken language, language authorities have positioned the standard as something which must be achieved through schooling and positioned themselves as those who decide what the standard is. The standard is also conceived of as non-regional, so it is more specifically attributed to educated people with no regional accent (i.e., an unmarked accent). Interestingly, in the case of the unbound reflexive, even though it is considered non-regional and is associated with a professional style of speech, critical commenters consider it to be a grammatical error that should have been rectified through formal education.

Although the imagined standard derives from educated speech that is free from supposed grammatical errors and dialectal features, there is still variation in educated speech and the occasional presence of non-standard features. However, linguistic variation is not as stigmatized when it exists among educated people, as emphasized by Lippi-Green (1993: 55) who quotes the editorial preface of the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, which chooses to only include variation among educated speakers in the dictionary:

In truth, though, there can be no objective standard for correct pronunciation other than the usage of thoughtful and, in particular, educated speakers of English. Among such speakers one hears much variation in pronunciation ... [our attempt is to] include all variants of a word that are used by educated speakers.

(*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, tenth edition, 1993, 31a)

Additionally, the Merriam-Webster dictionary entry for Standard English states that it is “substantially uniform though not devoid of regional differences” and is “well established by usage in the formal and informal speech and writing of the educated”.⁹ Even though complaints of prescriptive grammar errors like the unbound reflexive are directed at both educated and uneducated people, due to the privileged status of educated speech, the complaints are much milder towards educated people. For some educated people, the unbound reflexive is not even considered an error.

The privileged status of educated speech is also intimately related to class-based ideologies related to intelligence. These ideologies are especially easy to identify by considering class-based perceptions of children’s speech. Regardless of social class, children gain fluency in spoken language long before they have learned to write or begun school. However, their language use is still evaluated differently depending on the social status of the child. Gal & Irvine’s (2019) research on 19th century metacommentary about children’s speech provides a framework for understanding how two people might use the same exact non-standard feature, but will be evaluated differently depending on their social status.

Gal & Irvine (2019) analyze how upper-class children and lower-class children were evaluated differently in 19th century America even when both were using stigmatized features of lower-class dialects. During that period, linguistic practices were referred to in terms of two opposing categories: standard and dialect. The standard was indexical of high education and the upper-class, whereas dialect was indexical of low education and the lower-class. Gal & Irvine (2019) analyze American travel writer Anne Royall’s commentary as a way to understand how dialect is perceived when spoken by upper-class versus lower-class speakers.

Writing in 1826, Royall states that lower-class and upper-class adults speak differently, but “the children of both classes are good specimens of dialect”, because upper-class families hire lower-class caregivers for their children, so even upper-class children learn dialect first. These upper-class children who speak dialect have refined minds, but learn dialect from their nannies: “negroes and

9. “Standard English.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Standard%20English>. Accessed 13 March 2025.

illiterate white nurses”. Lower class-children who speak dialect have defective minds and their language practices originate from mental deficiencies. While upper-class children will eventually unlearn dialect and learn the proper forms from their upper-class parents and schooling, for lower-class children, “all the learning in the world will never break them of these vulgar habits” (Royall 1826 as quoted by Gal & Irvine 2019: 134–36).

In analyzing the above sentiments expressed by Royall, Gal & Irvine (2019) emphasize that this class-based ideology constructs a difference in the causal source of non-standard language. Dialect among upper-class children is caused by their linguistic input, but dialect among lower class children is caused by mental deficiencies:

Among the “better sort,” dialect was reproduced when illiterate caretakers contaminated children. But, for the “lower classes,” rhematization reversed the causal arrow. The bad qualities of speech were understood to be products of the same qualities in their minds; they could not be eliminated. (Gal & Irvine 2019: 136)

In the Internet metacommentary on the reflexive pronoun, classism does not emerge quite so blatantly as in Royall’s 1827 writing. However, standard language ideology and related class-based ideologies identified by Lippi-Green (1993) and Gal & Irvine (2019) do play a prominent role in shaping commenters’ perceptions. Subsequently, I will discuss metacommentary that harshly criticizes people’s intelligence level and grasp of grammar, an implication that these people are uneducated or lower-class, even though commenters do not use those terms. Then, I show that there is metacommentary that also attributes the feature to educated people. For educated people, this grammatical error is criticized as incongruous with their education, but it is not seen as revealing of mental deficiencies. Lastly, I discuss how there is a specific tier of educated people — respected writers — who are not seen as committing a grammatical error at all, but rather using the feature stylistically. Interpreted through the lens of Lippi-Green (1993), being highly skilled with the written language has earned these writers the social permission to intentionally deviate from standard grammar.

3.4.2.2 Criticism of the uneducated

Some of the metacommentary draws an overt connection between a grammatical error and a lack of intelligence. In this sense, uneducated speakers are not described as lacking in formal education, but are described as lacking in mental capabilities. For example, the commenter (8a) attributes the error to “ignorance of pronoun case” and the commenter in (8b) attributes it to “illiteracy pure and simple”. Similarly, the commenter in (9), uses the term “dumb” to describe the use of the nominative *I* in object position, but also mentions the use of *myself*.

- (8) a. I believe this intrusion of the self stems, in our case, from an ignorance of pronoun case and a fear of guessing wrong.
(NYTComment.RA Baumgartner)
- b. The reflexive pronoun problem is now so pervasive in the U.S. that it’s hard to see how it can be reversed. It is illiteracy pure and simple.
(NYTcomment.Francis McInerney)
- (9) I always suspected that the non-reflexive use of ‘myself’ was just a way to avoid the objective case ‘me’...
EX: Could I have some cake for Julia and myself?
Because, you know saying “Julia and me” will sound dumb to *some* folks, whereas “Julia and I”, in this context, is actually dumb!
(LLcomment.david donnell)

Although these comments do not explicitly mention education-level, they are terms that are commonly used when referring to lower-class or lesser educated people. Although the terms “ignorant” and “illiterate” literally refer to simply a lack of knowledge or a lack of formal education, these types of terms have a negative connotation and can be used to degrade people’s intelligence, even though it’s not possible to know exactly what these specific commenters intended. Viewed through the lens of Lippi-Green’s (1993) analysis of standard language ideology, this type of degradation tends to be leveraged against those perceived to be uneducated. In engaging in this type of discourse, these commenters are positioning themselves as superior to reflexive-users, both grammatically and intellectually. In accordance with Gal & Irvine (2019), it is evident that this type of

commentary does not attribute a grammatical error to a lack of formal schooling, but rather to a lack of mental capacity.

In addition to commentary that describes the people who use the reflexive with terms like “ignorance”, “illiteracy”, and “dumb”, the blog Grammarphobia more specifically connects the use of a reflexive to linguistic incompetency in English. As mentioned in the opening of this chapter, the Grammarphobia authors claim the feature reveals “a weak grasp of English”. This quote demonstrates the perception that the use of the reflexive is not just an error. It is an error that reveals something about a person: their incompetence in the English language.

(10) Sentences like those reveal a weak grasp of English. (GP 2013)

When the authors write a new post in 2018, they claim that there is nothing wrong with using reflexive pronouns “more expansively for euphony, style, rhythm, and so on”, as respected writers have done for centuries. It was only once the Grammarphobia authors realized that respected writers used the feature, that suddenly the feature itself transformed from being incorrect to correct. However, even in this newer blog post, the authors still maintain that there is a group of people who are using the reflexive pronoun because they have “a shaky grasp of grammar”. There is an implication that the feature’s status as prescriptively correct or incorrect is negotiable in accordance with the perceived intellectual competency of the speaker.

(11) Some of those adjectives used by critics (“nonstandard,” “incorrect,” “mistaken,” etc.) may have referred to the English of people with a shaky grasp of grammar (GP 2018)

3.4.2.3 Criticism of the educated

In addition to the type of degrading commentary that links a grammatical error to a lack of intelligence, there is also commentary that positions the grammatical error as simply annoying. Unsurprisingly, this milder criticism is applied to the educated. The commenter in (12) expresses that it drives her crazy to read it and hear it from educated people. By describing this feature as

“improper”, she positions herself as someone who is not a user of the reflexive and has a superior knowledge of grammar than people who use it.

- (12) I read it and hear it [the improper use of the reflexive pronoun] all the time from educated people. It drives me crazy. (NYTcomment.Pam Shira Fleetman)¹⁰

Similarly, the commenter in (13) explicitly refers to educated people as users of the reflexive, but places scare quotes around the word “educated” to suggest that these speakers might seem educated but their grammar errors call into question whether they should truly be considered educated. He does not exclusively attribute the feature to educated people, as indicated by the word “even”. For this commenter, he hears the unbound reflexive from uneducated and educated people alike and, since he considers the feature to be incorrect, he demotes the status of educated people to “educated” in scare quotes.

- (13) “You can notify either Bob or myself”. I had doubts about this usage for a long time, but nobody ever said anything about it, and even “educated” people use it all the time. (NYTcomment.Jim Weidman)

While the commenters in (12) and (13) are critical of educated people who use the unbound reflexive and position themselves as intellectually superior to these reflexive-users, their commentary does not link a grammatical error to a deeper intellectual incompetency.

3.4.2.4 The applauding of respected writers

When the Grammarphobia authors had a change in heart in 2018 about the correctness of the reflexive pronoun, this stemmed from their new found awareness that respected writers have used the feature for centuries. In the excerpt in (14), the authors imply that the feature’s correctness is contingent on the writer’s intention to use it stylistically and their grammatical expertise. These respected writers are later described as “undoubtedly aware of the proper uses of *I* and *me*”. In this

10. In an earlier part of her comment, this commenter had referred to the feature as the “improper use of the reflexive pronoun”.

way, their knowledge of proper grammar is perceived to give them the right to deviate from proper grammar stylistically.

- (14) There's nothing grammatically wrong with using "myself" and other reflexive pronouns more expansively for euphony, style, rhythm, and so on. Respected writers have done just that for centuries, both before and after the language gurus raised objections. (GP 2018)

The elevated status of respected writers is also apparent in an online article by Merriam-Webster. Although this article is descriptivist and attempts to argue against grammar critics, it still reproduces the social hierarchy of standard language ideology. The article legitimizes the usage of the unbound reflexive by showing that it is "widespread even in literary sources dating back at least four centuries" and gives quotes from writers and historical figures from the 18th to 20th century like Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Samuel Johnson, Jane Austen, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. In (15), Merriam-Webster refers to these people as "competent users of English", which implies that there are also incompetent users of English. Additionally, these are not just writers, they are writers who have contributed to what the upper-class considers the literary canon. Merriam-Webster further lists the general categories of "poets, politicians, playwrights, novelists, essayists, and even lexicographers", who are all considered by the upper-class to be highly skilled with words.

- (15) In our files we also have plenty of 20th century examples from such competent users of English as T. S. Eliot, Harry Truman, E. M. Forster, and W. H. Auden. (M-W)

Therefore, while the 2018 Grammarphobia blog post and Merriam-Webster article take a descriptive stance in the sense that they argue for the feature's legitimacy, they are actually just reifying the ideology that prestigious genres valued by the upper-class should determine what gets to be considered a worthy and correct linguistic practice. Furthermore, I have shown that, in the rest of the metacommentary, the unbound reflexive is still widely considered to be incorrect or, at the very least, annoying. In Figure 3.1, I summarize my analysis of how metacommenters eval-

uate reflexive-users differently depending on whether they are of a lower education-level or of a higher education-level. Those of a higher education level are interpreted as either run-of-the-mill educated people using the reflexive incorrectly or as a respected writer using the reflexive stylistically. Importantly, no speakers are perceived as using the feature in an unmarked, natural, or unintentional way. Even respected writers are perceived to be using the feature intentionally, but this intention is evaluated positively as a stylistic use stemming from grammatical creativity not grammatical ignorance.

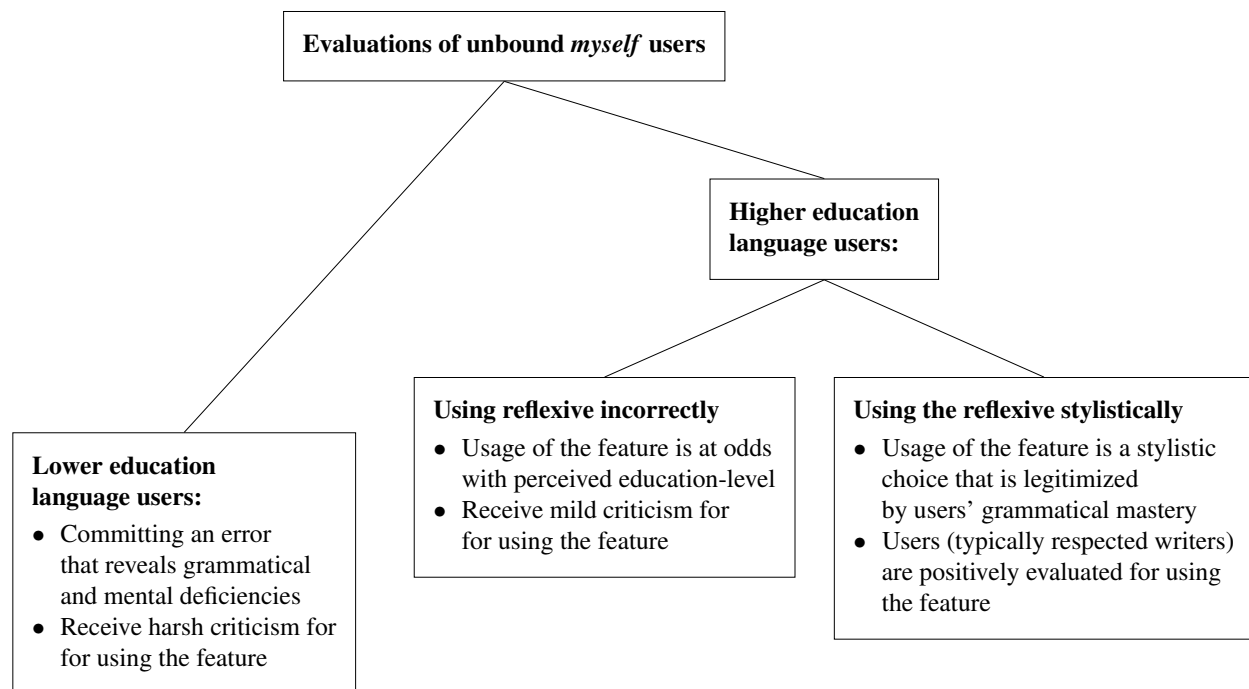


Figure 3.1: Evaluations of *myself* users based on education-related social status

Having analyzed the nature of distinct types of criticism (harsh and mild) and the nature of the applauding of certain speakers, it is also important to emphasize that these three types of discourse operate in relation to each other. The interconnectedness of the evaluations of reflexive-users of different education-levels is well illustrated by the comment in (16).

- (16) The thing that galls me the most is that so many people only listen to the way someone speaks rather than pay attention to what's being said. Consequently, the bumptious pretenders posh up and let rip with the 'selves' because they heard it from some other posh thing somewhere and surely it couldn't have been incorrect because he/she spoke so well...

In (16), the commenter establishes a class distinction with the term “posh”, which is a reference to the British upper-class and is a common and informal way to refer to its mannerisms, way of speaking, and lifestyle. Like many of the comments I have analyzed thus far, this commenter attributes the feature to people of multiple social classes. In this case, lower-class speakers are referred to as “bumptious pretenders” who are using the unbound reflexive because they have heard it from people of a higher social class. Upper-class speakers are referred to as “some posh thing somewhere”. This commenter is critical of both types of speakers, because they consider the feature to be incorrect for all speakers. However, similar to other metacommentary, the posh people are still described as otherwise well-spoken, but the lower-class “bumptious pretenders” are criticized for, 1) failing to recognize that the feature is incorrect, even though it is used by well-spoken posh people, and 2) using a linguistic feature as a means of “pretending” to be more formal and refined than the class status to which they have been assigned. This extremely classist perspective demonstrates one of the ways that listener perceptions of the unbound reflexive can be filtered through ideologies about larger macro-social categories like education-level and class. It further suggests that, in addition to the prominent association with a professional style, there is also an association with a high-class class style, which I will discuss in the subsequent section with regard to commenters who perceive social meanings related to formality, gentleness, and sophistication.

3.5 Perceptions of why people use the unbound reflexive

The metacommentary not only provides insight into who is perceived to use this feature, but also perceptions of why people use this feature. Even metacommentary that asserts that this feature is incorrect tends to view this grammatical error as an intentional move of some type. In other words, the unbound reflexive is not an accident. I analyze metacommenters as constructing two

narratives about reflexive-users' motivations: avoidance and indexing. In one narrative, people are portrayed as using the reflexive in order to avoid other variants like *me* or *I*. This motivation is attributed to people who are insecure about their ability to choose correctly between *me* and *I*. In the other narrative, people are portrayed as indexing specific social qualities or speech styles. In both of these narratives, this feature is seen as socially and discursively useful: whether it be a tool to avoid the higher social costs of the stigmatized *me* or as a tool to convey a social quality. Though these social qualities include opposing qualities like politeness and self-importance, the metacommentary reveals a common interpretation that the reflexive is linked to how the speaker depicts their role in the discourse and establishes their relationship to their interlocutor.

The two narratives I propose are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A speaker can be perceived as motivated by just one reason (to avoid other variants or to index a social quality) or motivated by both reasons. Additionally, these two narratives do not have a one-to-one mapping to the education-related social groups discussed in the previous section. That said, respected writers are not perceived to be avoiding other variants due to grammatical insecurity nor are their stylistic moves perceived as clumsy. In contrast, uneducated people and more run-of-the-mill educated people are sometimes perceived as clumsy or unsuccessful in their stylistic attempts to index particular social qualities. Most of the Internet metacommentary is simply not at all related to historic or literary uses of the feature, so this section, along with this dissertation, focuses on interpretations of its modern usage.

3.5.1 Avoiding other variants

Many commenters argue that speakers are using the first person *myself* in order to avoid the alternative variants *me* or *I*. Their avoidance is more specifically described as stemming from either the stigma of *me* or a more general grammatical insecurity about whether *me* or *I* is correct.

The comments below characterize avoidance of the accusative *me* in terms of “nervousness” (17), “an internal shiver” (18), being “terrorized by an English teacher” (19), and “fear” (20). The

accusative *me* is described as “lowly” in (17). In contrast to how they portray reflexive-users as insecure, these commenters position themselves as people who are not afraid to use *me* because they know it is correct in certain grammatical contexts.

- (17) The misuse of “I” and “myself” for “me” is caused by nervousness about “me.” [...] But the notion that there is something wrong with “me” leads people to overcorrect and avoid it where it is perfectly appropriate. [...] Trying even harder to avoid the lowly “me,” many people will substitute “myself”

(Brians)

- (18) Some people seem to have an internal shiver over saying ‘me’.

(NYTcomment.Lucia)

- (19) I think that somewhere, somehow, someone got terrorized by an English teacher for mis-using “me” while speaking, as in “him and me are going hunting,” and retreated to the false safe haven of myself. Who knows? Not me.

(NYTcomment.Michael Straus)

- (20) The use of the reflexive pronoun, particularly “myself”, is also linked to the fear that the simple objective pronoun, “me” is somehow grammatically wrong.

(NYTcomment.John Hamill)

Other comments describe reflexive-users as more generally avoiding “having to think about whether to use *me* or *I*” as in the Slate article, which sympathizes with the unfair criticism reflexive-users receive:

- (21) When it is used in compounds, such as “William and myself,” it avoids having to think about whether to use *me* or *I* – but that avoidance just draws further ire from the “Don’t you know grammar?!” set.

(Slate)

In the comments below, the decision to use *myself* to avoid having to choose between *me* and *I* is characterized as a way to “play safe” (22a). It is “a safe fudge” (22b) or a “a cover” (22c) for their grammatical inabilities. Characterizing these speakers as playing it safe demonstrates that there are negative social consequences to choosing incorrectly between *I* and *me*. Despite the fact that *myself* is also considered incorrect, it is seen as potentially safer.

- (22) a. They are not sure whether to say “thank you for the information you sent to my colleague and me” or “to my colleague and I”, so they play safe (they think) by saying “to my colleague and myself”.
(FT)
- b. I think this started because people didn’t quite know when to use “I” vs “me” or “him” vs “he” so “myself” or “himself” was a safe fudge.
(NYTcomment.VR)
- c. In the 1960s, I began noticing the use of “myself” as a cover for the inability of the speaker/writer to know whether “I” or “me” is correct.
(GP 2018)

The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language provides the same explanation in their description of the unbound reflexive *myself* in coordinate and comparative constructions.

The most common override is 1st person *myself*. The reflexive avoids the choice between nominative *I* and accusative *me*, and this may well favour its use in coordinate and comparative constructions, where there is divided usage and hence potential uncertainty for some speakers as to which is the ‘approved’ case.

(Huddleston & Pullum 2006: 1495)

In contrast to the Internet commentary, Huddleston & Pullum (2006) are not so harsh as to portray speakers’ uncertainty as stemming from grammatical inabilities. Rather, they suggest that it is understandable that people are uncertain given that there are specific constructions where multiple variants are in common usage.

In sum, the metacommentary that portrays reflexive-users as motivated by avoidance of *me* or avoidance of having to choose between *me* and *I* views this avoidance as an intentional choice. More specifically, speakers are often portrayed as choosing the lesser of two evils. The worst evil is choosing incorrectly between *me* and *I*. The lesser evil is misusing the *reflexive*, which is perceived as socially safer, but still does not provide immunity against grammatical criticism. In the words of the commenter in (19), the choice to use *myself* a “false safe haven”.

3.5.2 Indexing social qualities

While the avoidance narrative portrays speakers as moving away from other variants, the indexing narrative portrays speakers as moving towards specific speech styles, stances, and social qualities that are associated with the reflexive. I categorize the range of indexical associations into five general categories of social meaning: formality, gentleness, politeness, indirectness, and self-importance. Formality, politeness, indirectness and gentleness are related to each other, whereas self-importance stands in stark contrast. I demonstrate that perceptions of self-importance are less common and stem from one of the iconic interpretations of the form of the reflexive.

Formality. While I discussed in Section 3.3 how the unbound reflexive is enregistered with a professional speech style, here I show that the unbound reflexive also has a more general association with formality. The commenter in (23a) characterizes the reflexive as intended to indicate “seriousness of purpose or somehow elevate the level of formality”. However, “the effect is at odds with their intentions”, so while the speaker intends to convey seriousness and formality, the listener may not perceive them as successful in conveying these social meaning. Similarly, the commenter in (23b) describes the feature as “a misguided attempt to sound intelligent/educated/formal” and the phrase “misguided attempt” suggests that a speakers’ intended social meaning may not align with listener perceptions.

- (23) a. I find that people use "myself" to indicate seriousness of purpose or to somehow elevate the level of the formality in their utterance. Unfortunately, the effect is at odds with their intentions.
(NYTcomment.Karen Berlin Ishii)
- b. Every usage/phrase you mention here originated in the US as far as I know, beginning in the 1980s with the (incorrect) reflexive use of “myself” in a misguided attempt to sound intelligent/educated/formal.
(NYTcomment.Christie)

Formality is characterized specifically in terms of sophistication by the Merriam-Webster article. After giving many reasons why a speaker may use this feature, they conclude with this final explanation for why someone might use the unbound reflexive:

- (24) All this being said, it's still of course true that sometimes *myself* appears where *me* or *I* is usual because a writer or speaker thinks it simply sounds more sophisticated or "correct."
(M-W)

The characterizations of formality in terms of intelligence and education in (23b) and sophistication and correctness in (24) point more towards class-based language stratification than the professional workplace. Thus, this commentary not only provides evidence for a general association with formality, but also suggests there is another specific speech style associated with the unbound reflexive: a high-class style.

Gentleness. Some of the metacommentary describes the reflexive pronouns as sounding gentler, more refined, friendlier, or softer than *me*, *you* or *I*. In (25), Merriam-Webster suggests that some people see the reflexive as "gentler or more refined" than the "direct" *me* or *I*. As with the term sophistication, terms like gentle and refined invoke an association with a high-class style.

- (25) It may also be that some people think that *myself* is somehow gentler or more refined than the direct *me* or *I*; in its similarity to *yourself*, *himself*, and *herself* it perhaps suggests a parity between oneself and others.
(M-W)

The Financial Times constructs a similar contrast between the reflexive and accusative pronoun in terms of softness versus starkness, but connects the softness to friendliness rather than refinement:

- (26) Some appear to think that "you" and "me" are too stark and try to soften them. They think "let's arrange a call between myself, yourself and Belinda" sounds friendlier than "me, you and Belinda".
(FT)

Softness is also invoked by the commenter in (27) who says that "*myself* somehow softens a request or statement." In this sense, the softness is interpreted as connected to a stance of politeness. In an extremely unique explanation for why *myself* is softer than *me*, the commenter suggests that *me* evokes the "Me Generation" – a term coined in 1976 by journalist Tom Wolfe to describe the Baby Boomer generation and the postwar prosperity that precipitated increased individualism and the luxury of self-realization. Under this explanation, a reflexive-user is also avoiding *me*, not because

of prescriptive stigma, but because of negative associations of selfishness attributed to a particular historical generation labeled the “Me Generation”.

- (27) But America has been infected since the 1980s in the first person. Somehow saying plain old “me” became evocative, I suspect, of the 1970s “Me Generation”. So saying “myself” somehow softens the request or statement. (NYTcomment.Russ)

Politeness. Commenters also describe the reflexive as a linguistic resource for conveying politeness, a stance also related to formality. In both (28a) and (28b), the commenters use the term “obsequious”.¹¹ These commenters do not view this type of politeness as authentic or genuine, rather it is described as “feigned” and stemming from “falsehood”. In (28a), this politeness is attributed to employer expectations and, in (28b), the politeness is a tool to achieve a business transaction. For these commenters, the indexical linkage to politeness is also related to an association with a professional style.

- (28) a. But what is worse than the irritation of the feigned obsequiousness of the hotel employee (it is not his/her fault, it is the employer’s idea) is the way falsehood has infected our whole society. (NYTcomment.Andy)
- b. The worst culprits are car leasing salesmen when they are being unusually obsequious. (FTcomment.Greedy Brits)

Other commenters similarly perceive speakers’ politeness as clumsy and suspect. For the commenter in (29a), it is “a clumsy attempt”. For the commenter in (29b), it is a “misguided performance of excessive and suspect politeness”.

- (29) a. I put it down to a clumsy attempt to put some distance between the person addressing me trying to be polite by not being direct. (FTcomment.Euronomad)
- b. It’s used in exactly the same way, though, as a misguided performance of excessive and suspect politeness. “He and myself went,” “they and myself thought,” etc., leading one to surmise that the speaker’s self must somehow be a different entity from

11. Obsequious is defined as “obedient or attentive to an excessive or servile degree” (New Oxford American Dictionary).

the speaker.

(NYTcomment.Jennifer)

Indirectness. The comments in (29) regarding politeness further demonstrate a perception that politeness is achieved through indirectness or distancing. For the commenter in (29a), the reflexive is a way to create distance between the speaker and their interlocutor, which is seen as a way to be polite by not being direct. For the commenter in (29b), the distance created by the reflexive is not between speaker and interlocutor; rather, it is between “the speaker’s self” and “the speaker”. Interestingly, her perception corresponds closely to the structural analysis I provided in the introduction (Chapter 1). That is, *myself* as a structure of inalienable possession does refer to the speaker, but it represents the speaker through a proxy that is just a part of them: the ‘self’.

Self-importance. In contrast to the ideologically related meanings of formality, gentleness, politeness, and indirectness, the completely opposing meaning of self-importance is also attributed to the reflexive by a few commenters. These commenters interpret the form *myself* as an alternative to *me* that is self-important, pompous, or self-centered — an interpretation that stems from the fact that the word *myself* contains “self”. In (30a), the Slate article suggests that some people see reflexive as an overstuffed, self-important way of saying *me*. Similarly, in (30b), the Financial Times suggests that some people perceive users of the reflexive as motivated by pomposity or the desire to seem more important.

- (30) a. This one, illustrated by “There are two others here besides myself” and “He asked William and myself to do it,” is generally scorned these days by those who see it as an overstuffed, self-important way of saying “me.”
(Slate)
- b. Some put it down to pomposity, or a desire to seem more important.
(FT)

The Facebook poster in (31) also associates the reflexive pronoun with being self-centered, but specifically connects this perception to the order of the two conjuncts in a coordinate phrase.¹²

12. The reflexive *myself* can appear as the first conjunct (*myself and my friends*) or as the second conjunct (*my*

This commenter interprets putting *myself* as the first conjunct as iconic of selfishly putting oneself above others.

- (31) I miss the days when we didn't put ourselves first.
"My friends and I went to the game"
I believe that part of society's issues today are a direct result of our being so self centered.
Myself used to describe a situation.
"I stayed home by myself"
Now we put ourselves first even in speech.
"Myself and my friends went to the game" (FB)

Since self-importance is attributed to reflexive-users in some of the metacommentary, I consider it a possible social meaning, but it is not one that speakers are likely to intend.¹³ Rather than self-importance, a speaker is more likely to be intending to legitimize themselves: their competence, their perspective, or their social role. This self-legitimizing move can be interpreted negatively in terms of self-importance.

This section has demonstrated that commenters construct an avoidance narrative and an indexing narrative in their explanations for why people use the unbound reflexive. These two narratives are summarized in Figure 3.2. In my analysis of the indexing narrative, some of the commenters not only link the feature to certain social qualities, but they attempt to rationalize this link through iconic interpretations of the linguistic form of the reflexive — these iconic interpretations are analyzed in more detail in the subsequent section.

friends and myself), but the nominative *I* can only appear as the second conjunct (*my friends and I*)

13. Campbell-Kibler (2009) writes that "in the intuitions of naive speakers, social meaning has a conflicted relationship to intention, as some meanings, such as incompetent, are unlikely to be intended by most speakers while others, such as jaded, lose their meaning when recognized as intentional" (137).

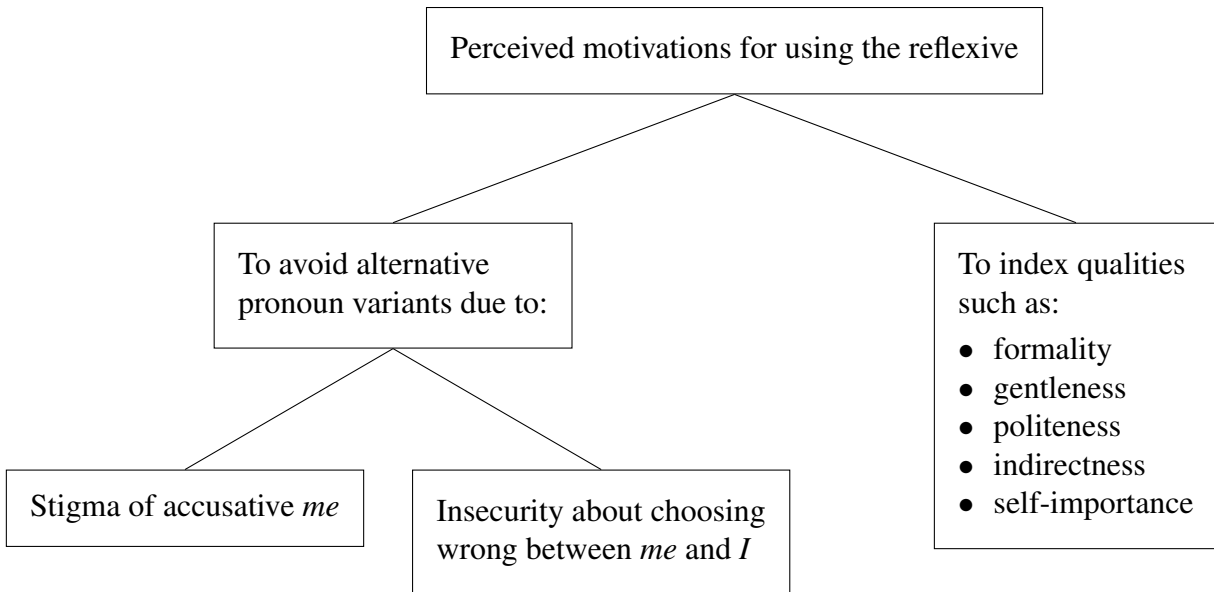


Figure 3.2: Perceived motivations for using the reflexive

3.6 Iconic interpretations of the linguistic form

In this section, I analyze the ways that commenters talk about the linguistic form itself and how they link properties of the linguistic form to social meanings. Commenters often construct this link in terms of iconic resemblances: a perceived natural resemblance between form and meaning that is forged ideologically (Peirce 1955; Gal & Irvine 2019). First, I discuss the iconic interpretations of the length contrast between non-reflexive pronouns (*me/I/you*) and the reflexive pronouns (*myself/yourself*). I propose that there is short–long distinction that metacommenters map onto two related social distinctions: plain–excessive and direct–indirect. Second, I discuss iconic interpretations that specifically focus specifically on the *–self* morpheme.

After analyzing the nature of iconic interpretations, I argue that commenters’ discourse about the linguistic form of reflexives shows that markedness is negotiated ideologically. The reflexive variant (in contrast to non-reflexive variants) exhibits the formal properties associated with marked forms (Levinson 2000), but I argue that, while these formal properties do contribute to a feature’s markedness, it is ideological engagement with these formal properties that fuels the social relevance of this markedness relationship. In discussing markedness, I demonstrate the ways in which

commenters' establish a link between articulatory effort and social effort. Commenters who perceive a speaker's effort to be excessive may also interpret that speaker as in-authentic, which is a phenomenon that can be captured by Acton's (2022) theory of intention attribution.

3.6.1 The short–long distinction

In consisting of two syllables and two morphemes, reflexive pronouns are longer (both in speech and writing) and more morphologically complex than non-reflexive pronouns. This length contrast is one of the most pervasive themes through the commentary. In Figure 3.3, I present the terms that Internet commenters use to characterize what I refer to as the **short–long distinction**. The non-reflexive pronouns are described as plain, simple, regular, ordinary, short, stark, clear, pedestrian and not good enough. These terms not only relate to shortness, but the terms “regular” and “ordinary” also suggest an interpretation of the form as unmarked, i.e., the neutral or default form. The longness of reflexive pronouns is described in relation to the non-reflexives, in that their length achieved by adding things (letters, a syllable, a suffix, weight) to a shorter alternative form.

In constructing a short–long distinction, commenters also iconically link these formal features to two closely related social distinctions: a **plain–excessive distinction** and a **direct–indirect distinction**. In these social distinctions, the shortness of the non-reflexive pronouns is interpreted as plain and direct. Conversely, the longness of the reflexive pronoun is interpreted as excessive and indirect. These distinctions are represented in Table 3.2. The nominative and accusative are grouped together as “non-reflexives”, because this is how the metacommentary constructs the short–long distinction. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, the nominative and accusative do differ from each other immensely in terms of prescriptive stigma and prestige.

Short	Long
Quotes describing non-reflexives: • plain old “me” • simple objective pronoun, “me” • regular personal pronoun • ordinary personal pronoun • little old “you” and “me” • too short and too plain • “you” and ”me” are too stark • clear • the direct <i>me</i> and <i>I</i> • “you” and ”me” is just too pedestrian • if only “you and me” were good enough for Americans	Quotes describing reflexives: • manic addition of -self as a suffix • five more letters and an additional syllable • adding syllabi willy-nilly • multisyllabic reflexive pronouns • it adds weight • overstuffed

Figure 3.3: Short–long distinction

NON-REFLEXIVE	REFLEXIVE
short:	long:
<i>plain</i>	<i>excessive</i>
<i>direct</i>	<i>indirect</i>

Table 3.2: Mapping the short–long distinction onto social distinctions

With regard to the plain–excessive distinction, the plainness of non-reflexive pronouns can be variably interpreted as either adequate or inadequate. The metacommenters tend to portray themselves as believing that non-reflexive pronoun are adequate. For example, when the author of the NYT opinion piece asks “What on earth is wrong with little old ‘you’ and ‘me’?”, he is claiming that non-reflexive pronouns are perfectly adequate and he is criticizing those who believe they are inadequate. Reflexive-users are portrayed in the metacommentary as believing that non-reflexives are inadequate (“too short”, “too plain”, and “too pedestrian”) and deciding to use a

longer form in order to elevate the formality of their speech.

Since metacommenters tend to believe that non-reflexive pronouns are adequate, its unsurprising that the added length of the reflexive pronoun is perceived as excessive. This attitude is reflected in descriptions of the reflexive as “overstuffed”. The addition of a syllable is “manic” and “willy-nilly”. Most importantly, the excessive length of the reflexive is not just criticized as unnecessary, it is characterized as bearing an iconic resemblance to distinct types of social excessiveness: 1) an excessive portrayal of one’s ego, 2) an excessively elaborate speech style, and 3) an overly complex referent.

First, the excessive portrayal of one’s ego is illustrated in (32). The increase in the letters in a word (“letter quotient”) is interpreted as indicating an increase in the status of the speaker (“aggrandize”). In other words, an inflated number of letters resembles an inflated sense of self. The author is not only arguing for a connection between the reflexive and excess, but he is mocking those who use an excessively elaborate speech style by imitating it himself in this excerpt.

- (32) obsequious multisyllabic reflexive pronouns with a letter quotient designed to aggrandize yourselves. (NYT Opinion)

Second, an excessively elaborate speech style is discussed by the commenter in (33) who also imitates the speech style in order to mock it. This commenter criticizes those who believe that an increase in letters and syllables makes language sound “classier” or “intelligent, insightful, and authoritative”.

- (33) ‘Yourself’ trumps ‘you’ because it has five more letters and an additional syllable. Therefore, applying what I will call the Ross-Fussell Rule, it must be classier. Paul Fussell, in his classic “BAD: Or, the Dumbing of America,” offered a disquisition on the assumption that a multiplicity of syllables transforms an otherwise trite and jejune discourse into an intelligent, insightful, authoritative communication. (NYTcomment.ACW)

Third, the commenter in (34) links the morphological complexity of the reflexive to the complexity of the referent.

- (34) Today “yourself” is not a person but a system built largely of commodities, including status, apps, meds, IDs, social networks, and tracking. It is not the same as “you,” which may soon require quotes to signify its meaning. (NYTcomment.42.99Percent)

Although the denotational referent of *you* and *yourself* is identical, this commenter argues that there are differences in what type of self they refer to. *Yourself* refers to a conglomerate of identity-related technology instead of simply a person. More specifically, the commenter refers to capitalist technology where states and corporations monitor our identities in many ways (e.g., state ID cards, online profiles, data and GPS tracking). The association with commodities and corporations also points to the feature’s enregisterment with a professional style of speech.

Ideologically related to the plain–excessive distinction is the direct–indirect distinction. The directness of non-reflexive pronouns can be interpreted positively as clear (e.g., “clear”, “simple”) or interpreted negatively as socially abrasive (e.g., “too stark”). The metacommentary posits that one reason people use a reflexive pronoun is to mitigate the social abrasion of directness. Because reflexive pronouns are longer, they are regarded as more indirect, and thus more polite or gentle. Although indirectness, politeness, and gentleness are perceived as linguistic strategies for mitigating the social abrasion of directness, speakers are not necessarily interpreted as genuine in their efforts. Speakers can be interpreted as insincere when their discursive efforts are seen as excessive: recall the the description of “obsequiousness” in (28) and “excessive and suspect politeness” in (29b). In this way, excessiveness emerges in the metacommentary not just in terms of iconic associations with self-aggrandizement, an elaborate speech style, or a complex referent, but also to excessive effort.

3.6.2 The *–self* morpheme

In addition to interpreting the length of the reflexive as influencing its social meaning in non-arbitrary ways, the metacommentary also draws specific attention to the fact that reflexives contain the word “self”. As discussed in Section 3.5.2 on indexing social qualities, the presence of the word

self is rationalized in distinct ways by different commenters. First, some commenters associate the reflexive with adjectives that also contain the word *self* like self-important and self-centered. One commenter uses the phrase “intrusion of the self” (example (8a)), which demonstrates an iconic interpretation where the addition of the morpheme *self* is seen as a literal insertion of the self.

Second, one commenter takes this iconic link to self-centeredness a step further and interprets the order of the two conjuncts in a coordinate phrase as iconic of a socially hierarchical relationship. In the FB post quoted in (35) (discussed earlier as example (31)), the author states that the order “My friends and I” represents a time in which we didn’t put ourselves first. The order “Myself and my friends” represents a modern time in which we are so self-centered that we even put ourselves first in speech. In this way, the FB poster argues that the linear order of conjuncts resembles a social hierarchy such that the speaker is placing themselves above others. This interpretation of conjunct order is not surprising given pre-existing conventions of using conjunct ordering to indicate hierarchical relationships, such as listing children in age order, listing authors according to their contribution, or listing more senior people before junior people.

- (35) I miss the days when we didn’t put ourselves first.
“My friends and I went to the game”
I believe that part of society’s issues today are a direct result of our being so self centered.
Myself used to describe a situation.
“I stayed home by myself”
Now we put ourselves first even in speech.
“Myself and my friends went to the game” (FB)

Lastly, one comment constructs an iconic interpretation of the *–self* morpheme in terms of social equality, a completely distinct meaning from self-importance. As discussed in Section 3.5.2 with regards to gentleness and refinement, the Merriam-Webster article suggests that the *–self* morpheme contributes to a sense of equality between oneself and others. It points out that non-reflexive pronouns like *I/you/he/she/they* are not similar to each other in their linguistic form. In contrast, reflexive pronouns for all persons share a similar linguistic form.

- (36) It may also be that some people think that *myself* is somehow gentler or more refined than

the direct *me* or *I*; in its similarity to *yourself*, *himself*, and *herself* it perhaps suggests a parity between oneself and others. (M-W)

In conclusion, not only is there a range of social meanings associated with the feature, but there is a range of iconic narratives used to rationalize some of these meanings. Diverse ways of interpreting the length of a pronoun and the morpheme *-self* show that iconic resemblances are not inherent, but are result of cultural systems that interpret signs as non-arbitrary. As proposed by (Irvine & Gal 2000), “from the perspective of ordinary speakers, linguistic differences are understood through folk theories (ideologies) that often posit their inherent hierarchical, moral, aesthetic, or other properties within broader cultural systems that are themselves often contested and rarely univocal”. Furthermore, ordinary speakers’ theories “make a difference in the production, interpretation, and reporting of linguistic differentiation” (Irvine & Gal 2000: 78). As such, my analysis of narratives of iconicity in Internet metalinguistic commentary is crucial for understanding how and why the unbound reflexive is used and perceived in certain ways.

3.6.3 The metadiscursive emergence of markedness

In the iconic interpretations discussed above, commenters compare the reflexive to non-reflexive pronouns in such a way that suggests that the reflexive pronoun is more marked. The linguistic form of reflexive pronouns is not just described as a long word, but its length is the result of the unnecessary addition of a syllable or morpheme, “self”. Whereas reflexives are described as conveying additional meaning, the non-reflexives are described as regular, ordinary, and plain. Here, I argue that the metadiscourse about these formal and social contrasts does not just reveal that there is a markedness contrast. Rather, it demonstrates how people engage ideologically with the properties of formal markedness.

The general concept of markedness is utilized in many fields (e.g., phonology, semantics, pragmatics, linguistic anthropology) as a way to analyze contrasts between related forms. In a markedness relationship, the unmarked form is the default and the marked form stands out as more salient

and noticeable. Within the field of pragmatics, the concept of markedness is utilized in order to account for how listeners' derive inferences about additional connotations or meanings a speaker might be signaling. More specifically, the pragmatics literature theorizes that there is a correlation between formal markedness (the markedness of a linguistic form itself) and semantic markedness (the markedness of an utterance's meaning). Levinson (2000) defines a markedness contrast as follows:

On the formal side, marked forms, in comparison to corresponding unmarked forms are more morphologically complex and less lexicalized, more prolix or periphrastic, less frequent or usual, and less neutral in register. On the meaning side, such forms suggest some additional meaning or connotation absent from the corresponding unmarked forms.

(Levinson 2000: 137)

According to this definition, marked forms generally have a certain set of formal characteristics. By virtue of their marked form, their usage suggests additional meaning. The unbound reflexive displays many of the characteristics of marked forms. Compared to non-reflexive pronouns, it is more morphologically complex and less frequent. For Levinson's (2000) analysis of the calculations speakers perform when deriving implicatures, it suffices to simply say that these properties lead a listener to interpret the form as marked and, thus, begin to infer additional meaning. In the Internet metacommentary I analyze, these properties are themselves the subject of ideological engagement. For example, the length of the reflexive pronoun does not simply make it stand out to commenters; commenters are metadiscursively constructing an interpretation of length based on an ideology that more verbose speech is more indirect, polite, or sophisticated. Thus, the formal characteristics themselves are involved in how speakers negotiate the associated social meaning. Given that it is common for language users to interpret signs as non-arbitrary (Irvine & Gal 2000), it is unsurprising that we observe this type of metadiscourse about the unbound reflexive, but my analysis aims to connect pragmatic theories of markedness with the folk ideologies that interpret these formal properties as socially meaningful.

Given the way that metacommenters explicitly engage with the formal features of marked forms, I suggest that there is not simply a correlation between formal markedness and semantic markedness. There is a relationship between the two that speakers can negotiate ideologically and interpret as non-arbitrary. I do not claim that this relationship is always negotiated ideologically or interpreted as non-arbitrary, but I demonstrate that it can be. In this way, I approach analyzing formal markedness distinctions as emergent, just as Bucholtz & Hall (2004) approach markedness distinctions between social groups as a process: “sameness and difference are not objective states, but phenomenological processes that emerge from social interaction” (269). Similarly, in Podesva’s (2011) analysis of the role of salience in the potential for intonational contours to take on social meaning, he treats “salience not so much as a descriptive fact, but as a process” (236).

Lastly, while the reflexive variant is more formally marked than non-reflexives, its relative markedness in an individual instance of usage is also influenced by the social context. That is, the reflexive’s markedness is not just interpreted in relation to non-reflexives, but also in relation to how congruent it is with the social context or what syntactic structure it occurs in. Furthermore, markedness is a spectrum not a binary, so a reflexive may be interpreted as extremely marked, somewhat marked, or even unmarked depending on other linguistic and contextual factors. For example, the unbound reflexive could emerge as more marked in subject position than in object position. The unbound reflexive could be more marked in a non-workplace context than in a workplace context, due to expectations about engaging in a certain speech style. Likewise, a listener who is annoyed by the unbound reflexive may interpret it as more highly marked than listeners who are not annoyed. Thus, while it does demonstrate the extremely rich ideological negotiation of markedness, the metacommentary is not representative of how the unbound reflexive’s markedness emerges in individual contexts or is perceived by a more diverse group of listeners.

3.7 The costs and benefits of using an unbound reflexive

Throughout the metacommentary, the fundamental question that metacommenters are grappling with and trying to answer is: why would a speaker choose to use an unbound reflexive when there are shorter and more frequent alternatives available (*me/I/you/he*)? This is precisely the type of question that is also fundamental to traditional pragmatics literature, which has sought to uncover the principles that explain when and how listeners infer additional meaning of utterances beyond what is conveyed semantically. Broadly speaking, listeners often assume that speakers aim to be as informative as necessary, without compromising conciseness (Grice 1975). Speakers are maximizing the benefit of conveying information while minimizing the cost of being verbose. When a listener encounters an utterance and believes that it has semantically equivalent alternatives that are less verbose or marked, they are likely to infer some additional meaning. In the Internet metacommentary, people are highly aware that, in using an unbound reflexive, a speaker has forgone a semantically equivalent and more concise alternative. In this section, I draw on Acton (2021) to make sense of the post-hoc cost benefit analysis that commenters engage in as they debate why a speaker would choose to use an unbound reflexive.

Building on the idea that speakers are weighing various costs and benefits in designing their utterances, Acton (2021) expands existing pragmatic frameworks by including broader social considerations. That is, costs can include increased articulatory or cognitive effort, but also social costs like violating social norms or sounding like a phony. Benefits include not just conveying propositional content, but also expressing emotions, showing respect or disrespect, and indexing desirable personal qualities (Acton 2021: 111). By including social considerations as a component of costs and benefits, Acton (2021) models the derivation of not just inferred semantic meaning, but also social meaning.

This sociopragmatic framework also bears on theories of markedness by characterizing marked forms not just in terms of their formal properties, but as “less frequent or consistent with the speaker’s grammar and repertoire, or less consistent with context-specific social norms” (Acton

2021: 113). In this sense, marked forms are generally more costly, because they are socially riskier or more effortful than their less marked counterparts. When a listener hears a marked form, they must evaluate why a speaker used that utterance instead of a possibly less costly alternative:

Why use a marked form when there is an ostensibly less costly form available? Again, under the presumption of basic speaker rationality, the marked form must offer some benefit that an unmarked form would not in the eyes of the speaker.

(Acton 2021: 121)

In other words, listeners are aware that speakers opt for the utterance they believe will have the highest possible net benefit. Listeners are trying to infer what this benefit is, while also adjusting their inferences based on their own experiences and ideologies. While Acton (2021) is describing how this process unfolds in an individual instance of usage (whether occurring automatically or through complex reasoning), the Internet metacommentary on the unbound reflexive provides a lens through which we can examine people's metalinguistic awareness of this process and their discourse about the costs and benefits of using a marked form.

One of the ways that costliness emerges in the metacommentary is in terms of articulatory effort, social effort, and cognitive effort. When metacommenters discuss how the reflexive pronoun is longer than non-reflexive pronouns, they depict this length as requiring more articulatory effort, as evidenced by commenters' descriptions of "adding" a syllable, letters, a suffix. In this way, metacommenters do not position the reflexive pronoun as long in an absolute sense, but long in comparison to alternative forms. Metacommenters also view speakers as expending increased social effort, as evidenced by comments about "striving", "trying", and "straining" to sound a certain way. While the reflexive pronoun is viewed as costly in terms of its articulatory effort and social effort, it is not necessarily viewed as more costly in terms of its cognitive effort, specifically the effort required to achieve grammatical correctness. Some metacommenters believe speakers use the reflexive as a way to avoid having to think about whether *me* or *I* is correct. This avoidance is viewed as both an avoidance of cognitive effort and an avoidance of the social risk of choosing wrong between *me* and *I*. Thus, the metacommentary on the unbound reflexive illustrates the com-

plexity of how a form can be interpreted as costly in some respects (e.g., articulatory effort, social effort), but as less costly in another (e.g., cognitive effort).

Costliness also emerges in the metacommentary in terms of social risk. Commenters have differing judgments as to whether the unbound reflexive is more socially risky than using *me* or *I* incorrectly. Some commenters claim that speakers use *myself* in order to avoid using the stigmatized *me*. For those speakers, *me* carries more social risks than *myself*. However, critical commenters describe this choice as a “false safe haven”, thus asserting that *myself* is also socially risky, perhaps even riskier. It is even riskier, because the speaker may be criticized for both the incorrectness of *myself* and for bungling their attempt to avoid a different grammatical error. First person pronoun variation in English is very risky territory and the Internet metacommentary shows that the nature of the precise risks is highly fraught.

Even though the Internet metacommentary is removed from an individual context of usage, commenters are explicitly engaging in the cost–benefit analysis proposed by Acton (2021). In light of this, I suggest that the connection between markedness and cost is fueled by and made more salient by this ideological engagement. Furthermore, while markedness and cost do have a close relationship, Acton (2021) identifies many types of costliness, each of which many be evaluated differently depending on the feature and the listener. A form can be interpreted as more effortful or risky in some ways but as less effortful or risky in another way.

In calculating the net benefit of using the unbound reflexive, metacommenters attend not only to the role of how its costliness (effort and risk) compares to that of alternative pronouns, but also to its benefits. The unbound reflexive can index positively regarded social qualities (e.g., politeness, competence) and speech styles (i.e., formal, professional, or high-class). It can also mitigate the starkness or directness of using *me* or *I*. While these are benefits that a speaker may hope to achieve successfully, the metacommentary demonstrates that this feature has an Achilles’ heel: increased social effort can be perceived as excessive, and therefore, insincere or inauthentic. As discussed in Section 3.5.2, there are many comments that indicate a divergence between the intention of

the speaker and the perception of the commenter, as evidenced by comments like “the effect is at odds with their intentions”, “misguided attempt”, “clumsy attempt”, “straining for exaggerated politeness, and “misguided performance of excessive and suspect politeness”. Another commenter makes a distinction between sounding smart and being smart. For the commenter in (37), sounding a certain way is not the same as authentically being certain way. There is a perceived mismatch between one’s speech style and one’s true self.

- (37) Americans are always, and ever, in the business of trying to make themselves SOUND smarter than they are. (NYTcomment.ChesBay)

This type of metacommentary situates unbound reflexive-users as trying too hard to index a social quality and, in the eyes of critical commenters, this excessive effort nullifies the intended social meaning or betrays the speaker as insincere or inauthentic. This phenomenon can be accounted for within Acton’s (2022) theory of intention attribution, which captures the distinct ways that a listener can attribute intention to a speaker and how this attribution can affect the emergence of semantic and social meaning. As outlined in (38), a listener can perceive the speaker as unintentional. Alternatively, a listener can perceive the speaker as intentional, but hoping for that intention to go unrecognized by their interlocutor. Finally, a listener can perceive the speaker as intentional and hoping for that intention to be recognized by their interlocutor.

- (38) a. No intention [to convey x]
 b. Intention [to convey x] with intention for non-recognition of intention
 c. Intention [to convey x] with intention for intention-recognition

When a speaker uses the unbound reflexive, listeners will vary in terms of whether or not they perceive that speaker as intending to convey a specific social effect with the reflexive. The Internet metacommentary situates this feature are highly intentional, but that may not be the case in each individual context of usage. One of the most prominent interpretations in the metacommentary is that when a listener perceives a speaker as being intentional but hoping for that intention to go unrecognized, the speaker might be perceived as inauthentic or insincere. For example, when

a speaker uses an unbound reflexive to sound intelligent or educated, they may be perceived as trying too hard and thus inauthentic in how they present themselves. Likewise, when a speaker uses an unbound reflexive to convey politeness, if that speaker is trying too hard, they may be perceived as insincere rather than genuine.

As empirical evidence for the specific phenomenon in which listener intention attribution can betray the speaker as inauthentic, Acton (2022) turns to Campbell-Kibler's (2008) matched-guise experiment testing perceptions of the (ING) variable. One of the stimuli speakers, Valerie, was perceived as less intelligent by participants who perceived her as intentional ("trying to impress") and more intelligent by participants who did not. Simply put, those who perceived Valerie as trying too hard to sound intelligent did not perceive her as intelligent.

Metalinguistic understandings of social meaning in my data take speaker intention into account variably, based on the kind of meaning being evaluated and whether it is seen as a legitimate object of intention. Valerie's use of *-ing* combined with her other characteristics successfully means intelligent to exactly those listeners who do not perceive that move as intentional. Those who do think she intends "intelligence" by her social cues react by seeing her as less intelligent.

(Campbell-Kibler 2008: 655)

The metalinguistic commentary on the unbound reflexive provides an additional type of empirical evidence for the relevance of intention attribution to perceived social meaning (Campbell-Kibler 2008, 2009; Acton 2022). Importantly, perceived intention is not always interpreted negatively, as the intentionality of respected writers is lauded as grammatical creativity and the intentionality of softening a request can be interpreted as genuine, not strictly as insincere. As shown experimentally by Campbell-Kibler (2008), "listeners shift their interpretations of a linguistic feature, highlighting the ambiguous role of intention" (637). The perception of speaker inauthenticity is just one of ways that intention interacts with social meaning, but it is a particularly prominent perception in the metacommentary. Given that many of the metacommenters are highly critical of unbound reflexive-users and none of them claim to be unbound reflexive-users themselves, it is unsurprising that this perception emerges prominently.

3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how the unbound reflexive is conceptualized in the public imagination as a recognizable sociolinguistic variable. The unbound reflexive is most prominently enregistered with a professional style of speech, specifically one that is associated with corporate workplaces, but also other white-collar workplaces with similar cultures of professionalism. While the most prominent stylistic association is a professional style, when examining commenters' perceptions of why people use this feature, I also identified a less prominent association with a high-class style, as evidenced by metalinguistic perceptions of sophistication and refinement. In addition to these specific stylistic associations, metacommenters also more broadly associate the feature with formality and stances of politeness and indirectness.

Although the speech styles and social meanings associated with the unbound reflexive are related to formality, the feature is considered to be prescriptively incorrect by most of the metacommenters. As such, I have demonstrated how metacommenters grapple with the paradox of a feature that is formal yet "incorrect". This paradox plays an especially important role in metadiscourse about who uses this feature and what their use of the feature reveals about them. Analyzed through the lens of standard language ideology and related class-based ideologies, I showed how uneducated people are portrayed as committing a grammatical error that is revealing of larger mental deficiencies. Educated people are criticized for using an incorrect feature in the sense that it is annoying or calls into question whether they should truly be considered educated, but they evade harsher criticism. Exceptionally, respected writers evade prescriptive criticism due to the belief that their grammatical expertise and skill with the written language gives them the right to use linguistic features in grammatically creative ways.

I have also examined how commenters metadiscursively construct iconic links between formal properties of the linguistic form and social properties. Metacommenters construct a short-long distinction between non-reflexive pronouns and reflexive pronouns. This formal distinction is mapped onto a plain-excessive and direct-indirect distinction. The metadiscourse about the iconic

links shows how people engage ideologically with the properties formal markedness. Lastly, I have shown that, as metacommenters seek to explain why speakers use the unbound reflexive, they are debating costs (i.e., increased effort and social risk) and benefits (Acton 2021). Lastly, I have shown that when this effort is perceived as excessive or when the speaker is perceived as concealing their intentions, many metacommenters perceive the speaker as inauthentic or insincere, which is a phenomenon that has also emerged in experimental work by Campbell-Kibler (2008) and has been accounted for in Acton's (2022) theory of intention attribution.

While this Internet metacommentary provides a lens through which we can understand the unbound reflexive as a socially meaningful linguistic feature, the advantages of this data source are also its limitations. Metalinguistic commentary operates at an extremely high level of conscious awareness, so, while it does provide insight into the cultural recognizability of the feature, it does not provide data on unconscious perceptions of the unbound reflexive in an individual instance of usage. Furthermore, the commenters represent just a small slice of society: those who were annoyed or fascinated enough by the feature to post publicly about it, but who do not see themselves as reflexive-users. Since many comments are made anonymously and I only analyze a small selection, it is not possible to robustly analyze how listeners' backgrounds affect their perceptions. As such, in the next chapter, I analyze the perception of the unbound reflexive through an online perception experiment, which allows me to construct a controlled environment in which participants are presented with a stimulus that contains either *me*, *myself*, or *I*. It also allows me to recruit a large number of participants, thus capturing the perceptions of more people than just those whose public Internet posts formed the basis for this chapter.

CHAPTER 4

MATCHED-GUISE PERCEPTION EXPERIMENT: ME, MYSELF, AND I

4.1 Introduction

While the last chapter investigated language perception as it is ideologically negotiated in public discourse, this chapter investigates perception through a sociolinguistic survey. Unlike metacommentary which is less commonly analyzed in the field of sociolinguistics, surveys have traditionally been a common method for analyzing the perception of a particular linguistic feature or variety (Schilling 2014). In using a survey, I aim to examine perceptions of the unbound reflexive within a specific context of usage (a workplace email) and to compare perceptions of the reflexive variant *myself* to perceptions of the possible alternatives *me* and *I*. To do so, I use a matched-guise test, which was developed in the 1960s as a way to compare listener perceptions between two or more language varieties (Lambert et al. 1960). The researcher designs multiple guises: stimuli of different varieties or that contain a different variant of a specific sociolinguistic variable. In a between-subjects matched-guise, each participant listens to or reads only one of the guises and is then asked to rate the speaker/writer on a series of personal traits; whereas, in a within-subjects design, each participant responds to all of the guises.

I conduct a between-subjects matched-guise test in which I used three guises corresponding to variants of the first person singular pronoun: *me*, *myself*, and *I*. While previous work has conducted an acceptability judgment experiment on this sociolinguistic variable (Maddeaux 2014), no research has used a matched-guise test. My experiment addresses the following question:

In a workplace email, what are the perceived social meanings of the unbound reflexive *myself* in subject position as it relates to alternative pronoun forms, the email recipient's social status, and the background and attitudes of the perceivers?

In order to address this question, I use a written stimulus in the form of a screenshot of a work email. I specifically chose a workplace email, because the metacommentary and Maddeaux's

(2014) research on the Enron email corpus show that the workplace, including emails, is a common context in which people encounter this feature. As I will discuss in the methods section, I created three email screenshots, which varied in terms of whether the coordinate subject of the target sentences was *Alex and me*, *Alex and myself*, or *Alex and I*. Participants were presented with one of these email screenshots and they were also given information about the email sender (Nicole) and email recipient (Michelle) that specified whether the recipient was a subordinate, coworker, or boss. Modulating the relationship between the writer and recipient is a way to subtly change the expected formality and prescriptive stakes of the context.

The factors of pronoun variant and email recipient are two independent variables (IVs) that may affect how the writer of the email is perceived. Within the survey, I collect data on other independent variables that may influence how the writer is perceived: participant demographics and participant attitudes towards grammar errors and professionalism, which constitute IV3-IV8. I also collect data on participant perceptions of the writer of the email, such as how well certain adjectives describe the writer on a 7-point Likert scale. These ratings are how I operationalize the dependent variables (DVs) of perceived social meanings. To illustrate the connection between my experimental design and my research question, I repeat the question below noting the dependent and independent variables.

In a workplace email, what are the perceived social meanings (DVs) of the unbound reflexive *myself* in subject position as it relates to alternative pronoun forms (IV1), the email recipient's social status (IV2), and the background and attitudes of the perceivers (IV3-IV8)?

Examining this question experimentally sheds light on the tension that emerges in the metalinguistic commentary regarding this feature as both prescriptively incorrect, but also associated with formality, a professional style, and a high-class style. The formality-related adjectives that I include in the experiment, *formal*, *articulate*, *educated*, and *professional*, are especially relevant for considering what predictions this tension makes. In subject position, the prescriptively correct and prestigious variant is *I*; the prescriptively incorrect and highly stigmatized variant is *me*, so we

can clearly predict that *I* will be rated much higher than *me* for formality-related adjectives. The behavior of *myself*, however, is difficult to predict. The fact that it is prescriptively incorrect would predict that it may pattern more closely to *me* and be rated low for formality-related adjectives. The fact that it is associated with formality would predict that it would pattern more closely to *I* and be rated high for formality-related adjectives. This experiment will thus provide a fine-grained window into how this tension between prescriptive incorrectness and formality plays out in an individual context of usage. It will further show how its perception is modulated by the context (i.e., email recipient) and the participant's background and attitudes.

Based on my results, I will claim that prescriptivism does affect how *myself* is perceived, because participants who are imagined to hold lower prescriptive standards (i.e., less educated) perceive the reflexive as more formal and professional than the nominative. In contrast, participants who are associated with higher prescriptive standards (i.e., more highly educated) perceive the reflexive as less formal and professional than the nominative. The email recipient affects perceptions similarly in that the reflexive is rated as more formal in the subordinate condition than in the boss condition, where prescriptive standards are higher.

All that said, based on nuances in the data, I will make a crucial clarification that the relationship between prescriptivism and *myself* is more complicated. It is not simply "incorrectness" that leads to a dampening of the reflexive's social meaning potential, but rather annoyance that this "incorrectness" is part of an attempt to sound more prestigious. In the metacommentary chapter (Chapter 3), I demonstrated that, while the metacommenters are indeed deeply concerned with the feature's prescriptive incorrectness, they are also annoyed because they believe that people use this feature to sound more sophisticated or more educated than they really are. In this chapter, I demonstrate that the experiment results confirm the relevance of the perception that the feature is used to strive for a formal style of speech above one's true social status.

In claiming that this feature's prescriptive incorrectness is entangled in a perception that it is an attempt to strive for a more formal style of speech, I suggest that this feature is perceived as an

instance of hypercorrection. Although a long analyzed phenomenon, hypercorrection also remains an *I'll-know-it-when-I-see-it* phenomenon that “has proven particularly difficult to define; vague and not particularly useful characterizations abound” (Janda & Auger 1992: 198). In discussing the unbound reflexive as having the potential to be perceived as hypercorrection, I characterize hypercorrection vaguely as a “reaching for prestige”. That is, people with higher education levels perceive the reflexive *myself* as a linguistic tool that people of lower social prestige (e.g., less educated, lower class) use in order to sound more more prestigious (e.g., highly educated, upper class), but prescriptive incorrectness and perceived effort hinders the success of attaining prestige. In contrast, people with lower education levels perceive the reflexive *myself* to be prestigious — a prestige that is successful. Therefore, while the unbound reflexive is not an instance of hypercorrection in the traditional variationist sense that it is over-application of a grammatical rule or frequency-crossover patterning (Labov 1966, 1972a), its perception aligns with the older sense of hypercorrection as a phenomenon in which speakers of a lower prestige variety attempt to imitate a more prestigious variety (Gumperz 1958, as cited by Janda & Auger 1992: 201). While I argue that this feature can be *perceived* as hypercorrection by some listeners, I do not necessarily suggest that “reaching for prestige” is always a speaker’s intention nor an inevitable evaluation.

Even though prescriptive incorrectness and class-based ideologies of hypercorrection do affect how the unbound reflexive *myself* is perceived, across participants of all backgrounds and attitudes, the experiment results show that the social meaning of *myself* is still more closely related to the correct *I* rather than the incorrect *me*. In other words, *myself* is not prescriptively stigmatized like *me*. Whether *myself* is perceived as questionably successful reaching for prestige or as actually prestigious, I argue that its core social meaning remains related to formality and professionalism.

The chapter proceeds as follows. I describe the survey methods and data analysis methods in Sections 4.2 and 4.3. In Section 4.4, I provide and interpret the results. I begin with summary statistics and, then, analyze the main effect of pronoun variant. Subsequently, I analyze how pronoun variant interacts with each of the other independent variables. In Section 4.5, I argue that

the results demonstrate that it is not prescriptivism alone that affects perceptions of the reflexive, but the confluence of prescriptivism and ideologies about hypercorrection. In Section 4.6, I discuss how these results inform our overall understanding of the social meaning of the unbound reflexive. In doing so, I integrate the quantitative results with the qualitative data from an optional open-ended survey question. In Section 4.7, I discuss future directions for this type of research including a follow-up experiment that I ran.

4.2 Survey methods

4.2.1 Participants

I recruited participants ($N = 440$) for Experiment 1 via Prolific — a platform for recruiting and paying participants to complete online studies. All participants completed the study in February 2022. For this experiment, eligibility was limited to L1 English speakers whose nationality and current country of residence was the United States. I limited eligibility in order to ensure that participants had at least some similarity in their sociolinguistic environment. Demographic information about participants' age, gender, ethnicity, and education-level is reported in Table 4.1. The information about gender and education-level was collected in the Qualtrics survey that I designed. The information about age and ethnicity was pulled from the participants' Prolific profiles.

The 440 participants whose data is analyzed passed all 4 attention check questions within the experiment. Although 450 participants took the survey, 10 participants failed one or more of the attention check questions and were excluded from analysis, but received payment. Participants were paid 80 cents to complete the survey, which was an average rate of \$18.11/hour. The survey was designed to take between 2-5 minutes and the median completion time was 2min 40sec.

Demographic information		Total
Age	Average Range	35.22 (SD = 12.03) 18 to 79
Gender	Female Male Non-binary Prefer not to say	47.7% (<i>n</i> = 210) 50% (<i>n</i> = 218) 2.3% (<i>n</i> = 10) 0.5% (<i>n</i> = 2)
Ethnicity	White Asian Mixed Black Other Unknown	76.6% (<i>n</i> = 337) 8% (<i>n</i> = 35) 5.2% (<i>n</i> = 23) 4.8% (<i>n</i> = 21) 2.7% (<i>n</i> = 12) 2.7% (<i>n</i> = 12)
Education	Some high school Completed high school or GED Some college Completed Associate's degree Completed Bachelor's degree Completed Master's degree Completed Doctoral degree	1.6% (<i>n</i> = 7) 8.9% (<i>n</i> = 39) 23.4% (<i>n</i> = 103) 9.3% (<i>n</i> = 41) 41.1% (<i>n</i> = 181) 12.7% (<i>n</i> = 56) 3% (<i>n</i> = 13)

Table 4.1: Demographic information for Experiment 1 participants

4.2.2 Design

The experiment was a 3x3 between-subjects design with two factors: email recipient and pronoun variant. The email recipient factor had three levels: subordinate, coworker, and boss. The pronoun variant factor also had three levels: accusative, reflexive, and nominative. Since this was a 3x3 design, there were a total of 9 conditions and approximately 50 participants saw each condition.

4.2.2.1 Email recipient factor

At the beginning of the survey, participants were presented with the image in Figure 4.1, which corresponds to the coworker condition.

This is Nicole. She is sending an email to her coworker Michelle who is leading a workshop the next day.



Figure 4.1: Introducing the email writer and recipient

In the text description that introduces the email sender (Nicole) and recipient (Michelle), I manipulated whether Michelle is referred to as a subordinate, coworker as boss, as shown in (1).

- (1) This is Nicole. She is sending an email to her {subordinate/coworker/boss} Michelle who is leading a workshop the next day.

I chose to vary the email recipient because an employee may be expected to adhere to different standards of formality or prescriptivism depending on who they are writing to, which may affect perceptions of each pronoun variant. Furthermore, by manipulating the social status of the email recipient, I am able to subtly manipulate the level of formality without modifying any aspect of the email stimulus, thereby both streamlining the experimental design and taking a fine-grained approach to formality within a single context.

4.2.2.2 Pronoun variant factor

After viewing the contextual information, participants were presented with a screenshot of a work email, which I designed to mimic a real email, as shown in Figure 4.2, which was the stimulus for

the accusative condition.

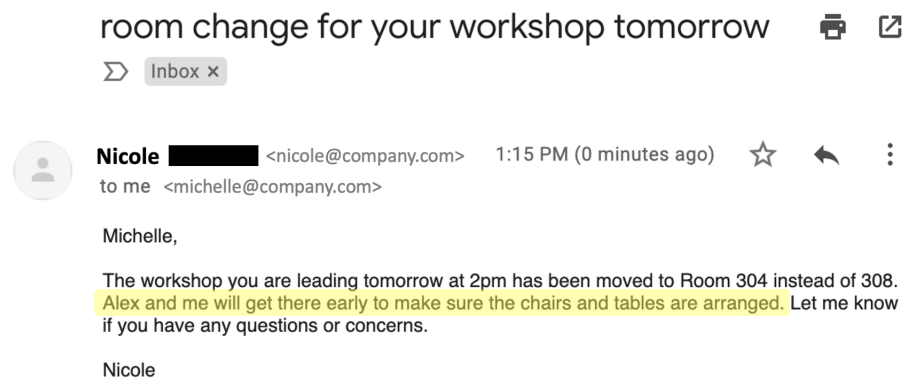


Figure 4.2: Stimulus with accusative pronoun

There were three versions of this email. In the target sentence repeated in (2), I manipulated whether the first person singular pronoun was accusative (*me*), reflexive (*myself*), or nominative (*I*). Each participant was presented with one of the three stimuli. The highlighting was part of the stimulus and participants were told to focus on the sentence that the researchers had highlighted.

(2) Alex and {me/myself/I} will get there early to make sure the chairs and tables are arranged.

I chose to use a written stimulus instead of a spoken stimulus, because using a spoken stimulus would have required making decisions regarding sociophonetic variables. Furthermore, although the linguistic feature is used in a variety of spoken and written contexts, a work email is a commonly attested context in which the reflexive is found. Work emails are also a genre that most participants are familiar with. Lastly, since the metacommentary suggested an enregistered association with a professional style, I aimed to design an experiment where this specific speech style is invoked by the context.

4.2.3 Procedure

The survey was conducted using Qualtrics. A complete version is available in the appendix. Here, I summarize the core components of the survey. After consenting to participate, participants viewed the information about the context, which varied in terms of whether the recipient is a subordinate, coworker, or boss. Then, participants viewed the email screenshot, which varied in terms of whether the coordinate subject contained *me*, *myself*, or *I*.

After viewing the contextual information and stimulus, participants responded to questions about Nicole's age, how much professionalism matters to her, and how well specific adjectives describe her, as outlined below.

- (3) How old do you think Nicole is? (16–100 slide bar)
- (4) How much does sounding professional matter to Nicole? (1-7 Likert-scale)
- (5) How well do each of the adjectives describe Nicole? (1-7 Likert-scale)
 - 1. friendly
 - 2. down-to-earth
 - 3. relatable
 - 4. humble
 - 5. blunt
 - 6. self-important
 - 7. formal
 - 8. articulate
 - 9. educated
 - 10. professional

In the Qualtrics interface, participants indicated her age on a sliding bar from 16-100. They indicated how much professionalism matters to her on a 7-pt Likert scale. They rated each adjective on a 7-pt Likert scale. The adjectives were presented in a matrix in randomized order. I list them above in (5) in thematic order to show that first four adjectives relate to being friendly (*friendly*, *down-to-earth*, *relatable*, *humble*), the next two relate to bluntness (*blunt*, *self-important*), and the final four adjectives relate to formality (*formal*, *articulate*, *educated*, *professional*). Lastly, participants were given the option to use a text entry box to write an open-ended response about

their perceptions of Nicole.

My choice of adjectives was motivated by my findings in the metalinguistic commentary. For example, the formality-related adjectives target general formality (*formal*), education or class (*educated*), prescriptive skill with words (*articulate*), and the enregistered association with professionalism (*professional*). The adjective *blunt* was included in response to the commentary that suggests *me* is too direct or stark. The adjective *self-important* was included because, even though distinct from formality, it is an evaluation of reflexive-users made by some metacommenters. The friendliness adjectives were included as a point of contrast to the formality and bluntness related adjectives. Furthermore, since I am testing perceptions of *me* and *I* it is important to include a range of meanings, not just those that I anticipate will be associated with the reflexive.

Since professionalism emerges so prominently in the metacommentary, I target this quality in two distinct ways, by asking both how much professionalism matters to the writer and how well *professional* describes her. The first question targets the speaker's intention. That is, do participants think that Nicole is trying to sound professional? The second question targets participants own perceptions of whether Nicole actually comes across as professionalism. In this way, these questions are prompted by my analysis of the metacommentary regarding how commenters often draw a distinction between the intentions of the speaker and the perception of the listeners. People who use the reflexive are often perceived as trying to sound a certain way, but being perceived as unsuccessful.

At the end of the survey, in a separate question block, participants gave information about their demographics (gender and education-level) and reported their attitudes towards grammar and professionalism by responding to the following two questions:

- (6) How much does it bother you when people make grammar mistakes? (1-7 Likert scale)
- (7) How much does sounding professional matter to you? (1-7 Likert scale)

4.3 Data analysis methods

The two factors that I manipulate in the experiment — email recipient and pronoun variant — are independent variables. The other independent variables are the participant attributes: gender, ethnicity, age, education-level, and their attitudes towards grammar and professionalism. In my analysis, I seek to understand how these independent variables affect perceptions of the email writer, Nicole. These perceptions are the dependent variables: the writer’s perceived age and the Likert scale adjective ratings. In the adjective ratings, I include the rating of how much professionalism matters to the writer, labeling this as *professionalism matters*.

To test for main and interaction effects, I perform fixed effect linear regressions using the function `lm()` in base R. In examining the main effect of pronoun variant, I report the main effects from a main effects only model. Subsequently, I use interaction effect models to examine the interaction effects between pronoun variant and other independent variables. For categorical variables in the regression analyses, I use dummy contrast coding, which is applied automatically for the function `lm()`. Each level of a variable is compared to a specified baseline level. For example, for pronoun variant, I set the nominative (*I*) as the baseline level, so the accusative (*me*) and reflexive (*myself*) are each compared to the nominative.¹

When I investigate the correlation between adjective ratings and the correlation between certain participant attributes, I use the `cor.test()` function in base R to conduct a two-sided correlation test with Person’s method. For all tests, I consider results at $p < .05$ to be statistically significant.

1. A statistical regression model can only compare binary categorical variables and continuous variables. As such, for a categorical variable with three or more levels, one must choose a type of contrast coding. Dummy contrast coding sets a reference level and compares the other two levels to it. In a linear regression, it is not statistically possible to conduct a pairwise comparison between all levels. Doing so manually leads to issues of interpretability and redundancy. By setting the nominative as the baseline level, I am able to do two comparisons (nominative to accusative and nominative to reflexive), but I am missing one comparison (reflexive to the accusative). Although I could do that comparison manually, it does not add anything to our understanding of the data since that relationship is inferrable from the graphs and other tests.

4.4 Results and discussion

4.4.1 Summary statistics and correlations

Before testing how perceptions of the writer are shaped by the pronoun variant, email recipient, and participant attributes, I provide an overview of who the participants are and whether there are correlations between any of the participant attributes. I also provide an overview of perceptions of the writer and whether there are correlations between any of the adjective ratings.

Participant demographics. The demographic information of age, gender, ethnicity, and education-level was reported in Table 4.1. The participants ranged in age from 18-79, with an average age of 35. There was an even split between men and women, with a small number of non-binary participants. Over 75% of participants were white. Around 75% of participants had attended some college or completed a degree. Around 10% only had a high school education and around 15% had completed an advanced degree.

Participant attitudes. Regarding participants' attitudes towards grammar and professionalism, Figure 4.3 shows participant ratings of how much they are bothered by grammar mistakes (mean = 4.14, SD = 1.59). The median rating was 4, which was the response "somewhat bothered by grammar mistakes". Figure 4.4 shows participant ratings of how much they care about professionalism (mean = 4.78, SD = 1.49, median = 5). In comparing the two histograms, we see that participants tend to care at least somewhat about both grammar and professionalism. However, while caring about grammar is normally distributed, caring about professionalism is left-skewed. That is, the majority of participants report higher levels of caring about professionalism.

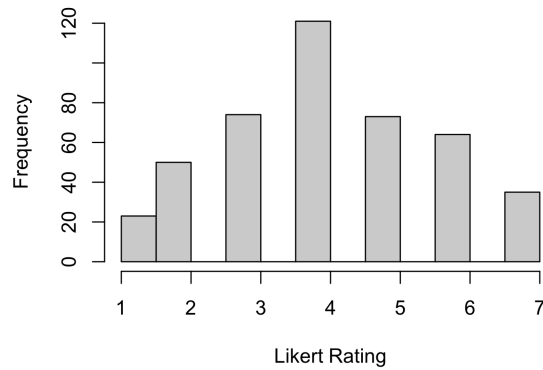


Figure 4.3: How much participants care about grammar

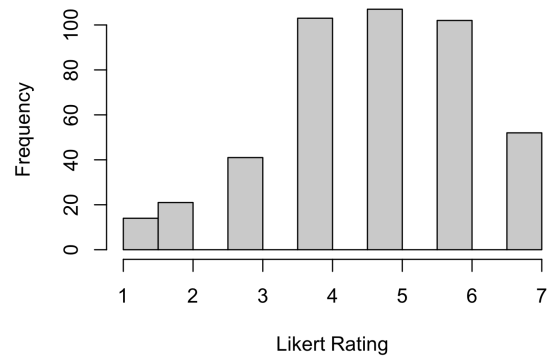


Figure 4.4: How much participants care about professionalism

Correlations between participant attributes. It is relevant to consider whether any of these participant demographics and attitudes correlate with each other. Since participant gender and ethnicity do not turn out to be statistically significant predictors in my results, I only examine correlations between education-level, age, attitude towards grammar, and attitude towards professionalism. The visualization in Figure 4.5 illustrates the correlations between these participant attributes.

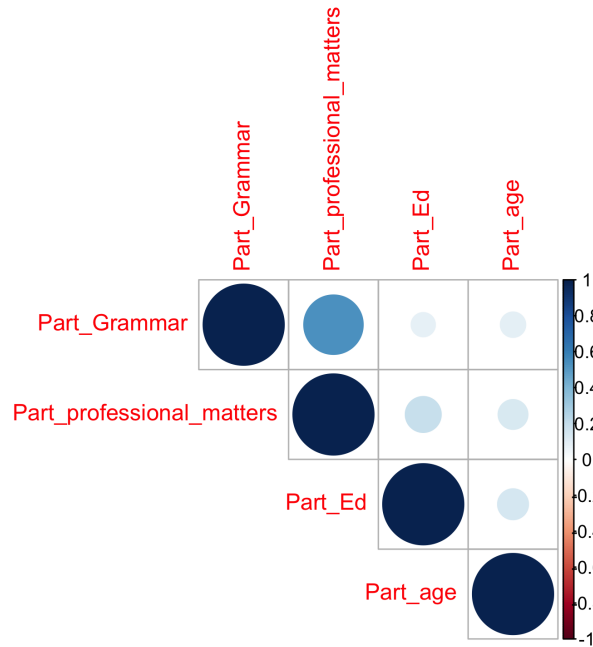


Figure 4.5: Correlation map of participant attributes²

As shown by the sky blue dot, there is strong positive correlation between caring about grammar and caring about professionalism ($r(438) = .53, p < .001$).³ Interestingly, although we might predict older people to care more about grammar and professionalism, there is only a weak positive correlation between participant age and caring about grammar ($r(435) = .1, p < .05$) or caring about professionalism ($r(435) = .13, p < .01$). Likewise, although we might predict people with a higher education-level to care more about grammar and professionalism, there is no statistically significant correlation between education-level and caring about grammar ($r(438) = .09, p = .0535$) and there is only a weak positive correlation between education-level and caring about professionalism ($r(438) = .19, p < .001$). These results do not necessarily indicate that older people or people of a high-education level do not have higher prescriptive standards, simply that they do not self-report

2. A blue dot represents a positive correlation (and a red dot would represent a negative correlation). The dot size and darkness correspond to the strength of the correlation.

3. I describe $r = 0.5$ to $.99$ as strong, $r = 0.3$ to 0.49 as moderate, and $r = 0.1$ to 0.29 as weak, and $r = .01$ to $.09$ as negligible.

themselves as such to a strong degree, which is an important finding.

Perceptions of the email writer. These perceptions are comprised of her age, how well certain adjectives describe her, and how much professionalism matters to her. As for the writer's age, the average age guessed was 33 years old ($SD = 7.34$). The median age was 32, with a range of 19–60.⁴ This distribution of age guesses is expected given that this is a work email, so the writer must be of working age.

As for how well certain adjectives describe the writer and how much professionalism matters to her, I illustrate the average Likert rating for each of these attribute in Figure 4.6. Henceforth, I use the label “professional_describes” to report how well the adjective *professional* describes the writer. I use the label “professional_matters” to report how much professionalism matters to the writer and group this attribute in with the rest of the formality-related adjectives. For all of the friendliness and formality-related adjectives, the average Likert rating was above 4, which means she was perceived to be at least somewhat described by these adjectives. The writer was not perceived to be blunt or self-important (Likert rating < 4). I attribute the overall low rating of *blunt* and *self-important* to the content of the email stimulus. Specifically, Nicole writes that she will be arriving early to make sure the room is set up. Some participants commented in their open-ended response that she seemed proactive, helpful and like a team player. These comments suggest that the content of the email was not conducive to perceptions of bluntness or self-importance.

4. There were two participants who guessed age 83 and age 92. Being both statistical outliers and absurd guesses for a work email, I re-assigned these two values to age 50, which was 2 standard deviations above the mean.

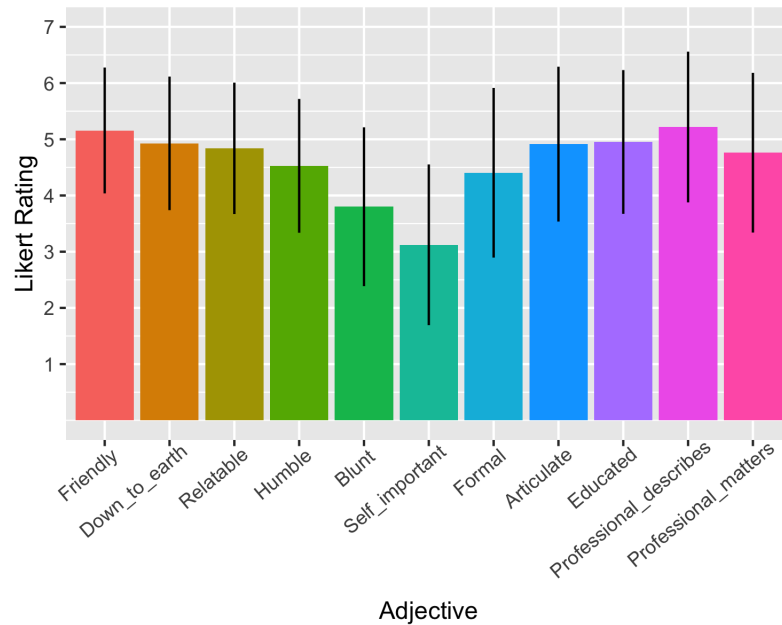


Figure 4.6: Average Likert scale ratings for each attribute⁵

Correlations between writer attributes. Correlation testing reveals that the 11 adjectives can be understood to form three thematic groups: friendliness-related, bluntness-related, and formality-related. The visualization in Figure 4.7 shows the correlations between adjectives. There is a moderate to strong positive correlation among the friendliness-related adjectives. Similarly, there is a strong positive correlation among the formality-related adjectives. As shown by the lighter blue dots in the upper right, there is also a weak to moderate correlation between the friendliness-related adjectives and the formality-related adjectives. As for *blunt* and *self-important*, there is a weak positive correlation between these two adjectives, but these two adjectives do not consistently correlate with either the friendliness-related or formality-related adjectives.⁶

In the following sections examining how pronoun variant, email recipient, and participant attributes impact perceptions of Nicole, the adjectives within a thematic group (friendliness, blunt-

5. The error bars indicate the standard deviations, not the standard errors or confidence intervals.

6. There is from a weak negative correlation between *blunt* and *friendly*, shown by the light red dot. There is also a weak positive correlation between *formal* and *blunt* and between *formal* and *self-important*, but all other correlations involving *blunt* or *self-important* are negligible and do not reach statistical significance.

ness, and formality) tend to behave similarly. However, I will also discuss instances where there are important differences between individual adjectives within a thematic group.

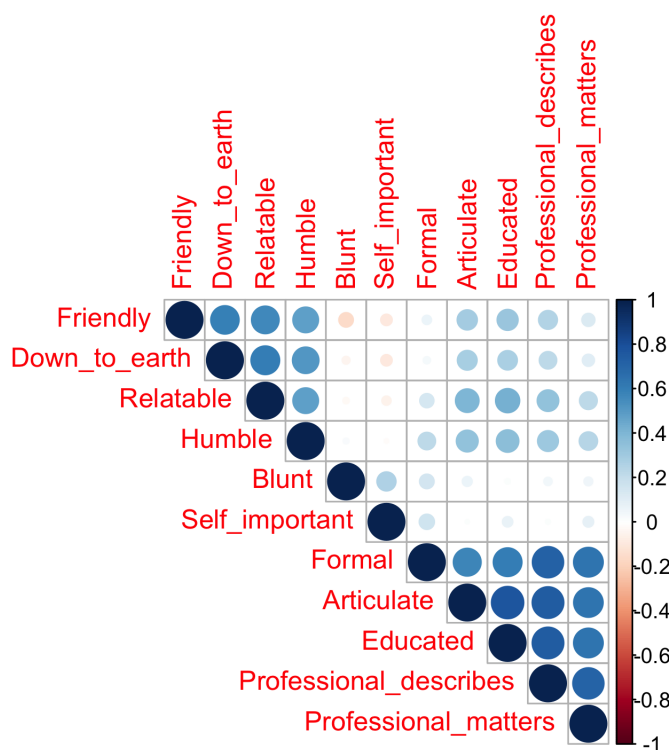


Figure 4.7: Correlation matrix of writer attributes⁷

4.4.2 Main effect of pronoun variant

In this section, I test whether there is a main effect of pronoun variant on participant's guesses of the writer's age and adjective ratings.⁸

In analyzing perceptions of the writer's age, there is a main effect of pronoun variant. When Nicole uses the accusative variant *me*, she is perceived to be about 2.5 years younger than when she uses the nominative variant *I* ($\beta = -2.61$, $SE = .95$, $p < .01$). Although the writer is perceived to be

7. A blue dot represents a positive correlation and a red dot represent a negative correlation. The dot size and darkness represent the strength of the correlation.

8. For all statistical tests, I code the nominative condition as the baseline, so my linear regression results report just two comparisons: nominative to accusative and nominative to reflexive.

younger when she uses the accusative, using the accusative in a coordinate subject is not a recent linguistic phenomenon. This result may be due to the fact that the accusative is seen as both grammatically sloppy and informal, which are both traits often attributed to young people. Interestingly, there is no statistically significant difference in perceptions of her age between the nominative *I* and reflexive *myself*. While the reflexive is seen as grammatically incorrect, it is not seen as informal, which may explain why a writer who uses the reflexive is not perceived as younger. This result also suggests that the reflexive is not perceived as belonging to a younger generation, thus aligning with the metalinguistic commentary (Chapter 3) in which there was only minimal commentary on age. Even when I examined whether email recipient or participant attributes affected perceptions of the writer's age for each pronoun variant, none of these interaction models revealed differences between the nominative and reflexive, thus the writer's age is not discussed further in this chapter.

In analyzing the adjective ratings, there is also a main effect of pronoun variant. The most notable finding is that for all of the formality-related adjectives, the reflexive *myself* and nominative *I* pattern together and are both rated much higher than the accusative *me*. To illustrate, I present the graph in Figure 4.8, which shows the average Likert scale rating of each adjective, grouped by pronoun variant.

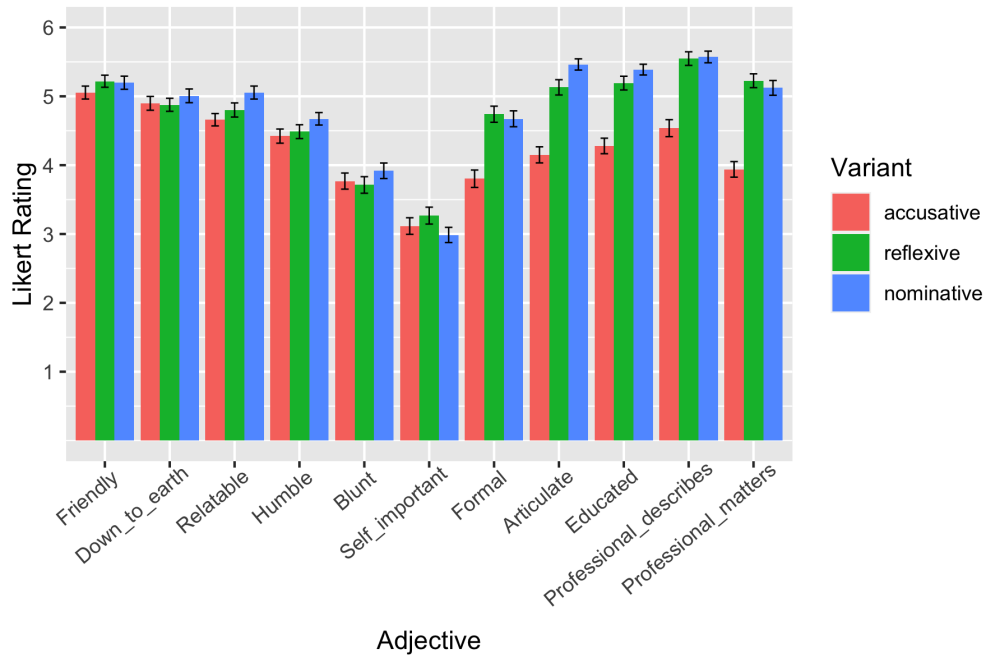


Figure 4.8: Average Likert scale ratings grouped by pronoun variant⁹

Figure 4.8 shows that, for the formality-related adjectives, the accusative (red bar) is rated much lower than both the reflexive and nominative (green and blue bars). This difference is statistically significant, such that the accusative is rated about 1 Likert point lower than the nominative for: *formal* ($\beta = -0.87$, $SE = .17$, $p < .001$), *articulate* ($\beta = -1.31$, $SE = .15$, $p < .001$), *educated* ($\beta = -1.11$, $SE = .14$, $p < .001$), *professional* ($\beta = -1.03$, $SE = .15$, $p < .001$), and *professionalism matters* ($\beta = -1.18$, $SE = .15$, $p < .001$). I interpret the much lower rating of the accusative as revealing the deep-rooted stigma associated with this prescriptively incorrect variant.

For all of the other adjectives, the three pronoun variants are rated more similarly. There are no statistically significant differences between variants except in the case of the *relatable* rating where the accusative is rated as slightly less relatable than the nominative ($\beta = -0.39$, $SE = .14$, $p < .01$). This difference may indicate that participants see themselves as someone who would use the nominative, so they relate better to a writer who uses the nominative. The extremely low rating

9. Error bars represent the standard error in this graph and all subsequent graphs.

of the accusative for the formality-related adjectives, but not for the other adjectives, aligns with the expectation that prescriptive standards are highly valued in evaluating levels of formality, but are less influential in evaluating other attributes of the writer.

If the prescriptive stigma of the accusative explains its dramatically lower ratings in evaluating formality, why do we not see the same for the reflexive pronoun? The reflexive is also widely considered to be prescriptively incorrect (even though we cannot know exactly how each participant judges its acceptability), but it actually patterns with the nominative. Both the reflexive and nominative are rated very highly for *formal*, *articulate*, *educated*, *professional*, and *professionalism matters*. In fact, the only statistically significant difference between the reflexive and nominative is that the reflexive is rated as slightly less articulate ($\beta = -0.33$, $SE = .15$, $p < .05$), which is unsurprising given that articulateness is the trait most directly tied to prescriptive language use. These results demonstrate that, although the accusative and reflexive are both “incorrect”, only the accusative is highly stigmatized. Moreover, the reflexive is actually rated very highly for formality-related adjectives, thus suggesting that its social meaning is indeed related to formality as this perception comes through strongly despite its incorrectness.

Although the main effect model suggests that there is no difference between the nominative and reflexive, this is a surprising result given that the reflexive is prescriptively incorrect and it is socially marked. That is, the metalinguistic commentary (Chapter 3) shows that the reflexive is seen as indexing specific social meanings and speech styles that set it apart from the nominative and accusative. The open-ended responses on the experiment also reveal differing perceptions of the nominative and reflexive. In the following sections, I show that statistically significant differences between the reflexive and the nominative do emerge when we move beyond a main effect model and instead consider interaction effects between pronoun variant and email recipient, participant demographics, and participant attitudes. These interaction models show that there is a consistent cross-over interaction effect that reveals a difference between the nominative and reflexive that is obscured in the main effect model.

4.4.3 Email recipient and pronoun variant

In this section, I address how the social status of the email recipient affects the perception of each pronoun variant.

The accusative variant is rated lower than both the nominative and reflexive whether the recipient is a subordinate, coworker, or boss. If the email writer is expected to adhere to higher prescriptive standards when writing to a boss, we would expect that participants would be even more critical of her use of the accusative in the boss condition. Surprisingly, the results show that ratings of the accusative are not affected by the factor of email recipient.

The reflexive and nominative variants are judged differently depending on whether she is writing her boss or her subordinate, such that there is a statistically significant cross-over interaction effect. For the attributes of *formal* and *articulate*, when she is writing to her boss rather than her subordinate, the reflexive is rated as less formal ($\beta = -1.15$, $SE = .4$, $p < .01$) and less articulate ($\beta = -0.71$, $SE = .36$, $p < .05$) than the nominative. The relationship between the nominative and reflexive is reversed when she is writing to her subordinate. This pattern is shown in Figure 4.9 (*formal*) and Figure 4.10 (*articulate*).

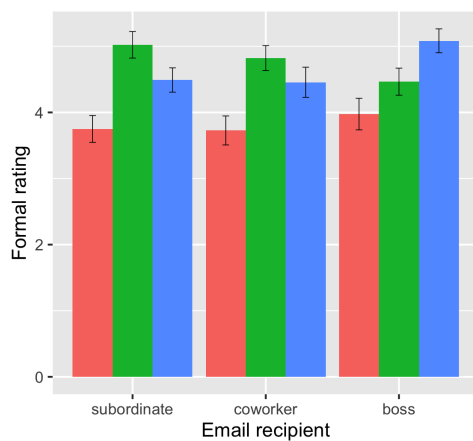


Figure 4.9: Formal

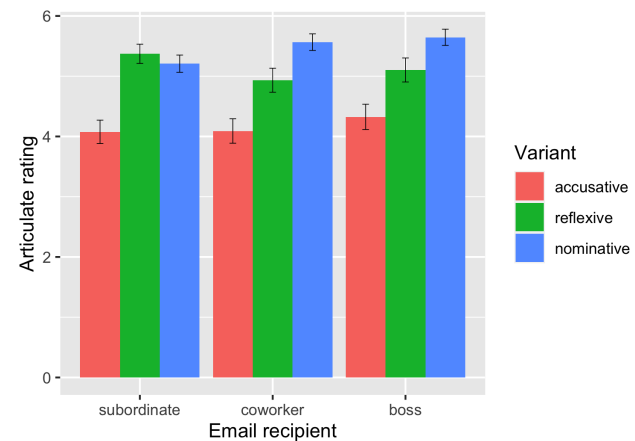


Figure 4.10: Articulate

The other formality-related adjectives (*educated*, *professional*, and *professionalism matters*) reveal

the same cross-over interaction, but not at a level of statistical significance ($p=.11$). The reflexive is rated higher than the nominative when the recipient is the writer's subordinate, but the reflexive is rated lower than the nominative when the recipient is the writer's boss. In contrast to the formality-related adjectives, this pattern is not observed for any of the friendliness or bluntness adjectives.

I interpret these results as showing that participants are attuned to how the recipient of an email affects the importance of prescriptive standards, but that it is not solely prescriptive standards at play. Differences in prescriptive standards accurately predict that, when writing to a boss, the status of the reflexive as "incorrect" is highly relevant, thus it is rated lower than the nominative for formality-related qualities. In contrast, when writing to a subordinate, the status of the reflexive as "incorrect" is not as relevant, so the social meaning of the reflexive emerges so strongly that it is actually seen as more formal, articulate, educated, and professional than the nominative. That said, if it were only prescriptive standards at play, we would expect email recipient to also affect ratings of the accusative, which it does not. As such, I would argue that participants are also perceiving the writer who is addressing her boss as using the feature in order to strive for formality. In other words, it is perceived as hypercorrection because she is writing to someone above her. In contrast, the writer who is addressing her subordinate is assumed to occupy a higher social status (by virtue of having a subordinate at work) and her use of the reflexive is not perceived as a striving for formality; it simply is formal.

The coworker condition inhabits a middle ground and exhibits a pattern which provides further insight on how prescriptive standards and hypercorrection both play a role. For *formal* and *professional*, the coworker condition patterns with the subordinate condition: the reflexive is rated as more formal and professional than the nominative. For *articulate*, the coworker condition patterns with the boss condition: the reflexive is rated as less articulate than the nominative. These patterns are statistically significant ($p<.05$) and suggest that, when writing to a coworker, the prescriptive standards are high enough that perceptions of articulateness are affected, which is the attribute most closely linked to prescriptive language use. Since she is writing to a coworker, i.e., someone

of similar social status, she is not perceived as using the reflexive as a form of hypercorrection, thus it is more likely to be perceived as a successful indexing of formality and professionalism.

4.4.4 Participant demographics and pronoun variant

In this section, I address how participant demographics affect perceptions of the writer's use of each pronoun variant. Gender and ethnicity have no effect on perceptions of the writer, thus I begin by discussing participant age, which behaves in accordance with the expectation that older people have higher prescriptive standards. While older people are more critical of the accusative than younger people, they do not apply that same level of criticism to the reflexive. Subsequently, I discuss participant education-level and show that it is the most important demographic characteristic for understanding perceptions of the reflexive pronoun. Those with a high school degree and those with an advanced degree diverge greatly in how they rate the reflexive and nominative.

Participant age. Participant age affects how participants rate the writer, but only for the accusative variant and only for certain adjectives: *articulate*, *professional*, and *professionalism matters*. Specifically, the older the participant, the lower they rate the accusative for *articulate* ($\beta = -.03$, $SE = .01$, $p < .05$), *professional* ($\beta = -.03$, $SE = .01$, $p < .05$), and *professionalism matters* ($\beta = -.05$, $SE = .01$, $p < .001$) in comparison to the nominative. The decline in the rating of the accusative in accordance with participant age is illustrated in Figures 4.11–4.13. In contrast to the accusative, there is only a subtle decline in the rating of the reflexive for *articulate* and *professional*, which is not statistically significant. Although not statistically significant, the graphs for *professional* (Figure 4.12) and *professionalism matters* (Figure 4.13) do show that the nominative and reflexive lines cross. The youngest participants (in their 20s–30s) rate the reflexive higher than the nominative, but the older participants rate the reflexive lower than the nominative.

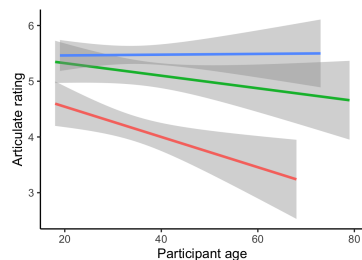


Figure 4.11: Articulate

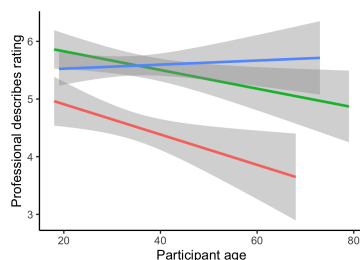


Figure 4.12: Professional describes the writer

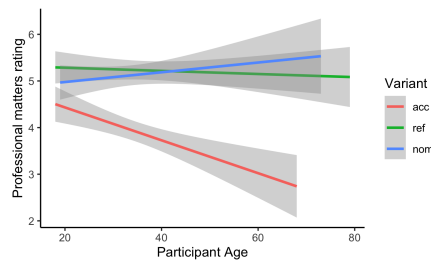


Figure 4.13: Professionalism matters to the writer

Based on the strong effect of participant age on the rating of the accusative but barely on the reflexive and nominative, it appears that older generations are critical of the error of using *me*, but are less bothered by the use of *myself*. Older generations are often assumed to hold higher prescriptive standards, whether it be because people become more prescriptive as they age or because a particular generation has consistently held stronger prescriptive beliefs throughout their life. That said, I discussed in Section 4.4.1 that there is only a weak correlation between participant age and how much a participant reports that they are bothered by grammar errors. Regardless of whether older people self-report being bothered by grammar errors, the results of my survey — that older participants are more critical of the accusative than younger participants are — support the idea that older people are more prescriptive. If older people are more prescriptive, then why do we fail to see ratings of the reflexive decline with participant age? These results suggest that, even for people with more prescriptive tendencies, the accusative is still much more stigmatized than the reflexive. Additionally, it suggests that prescriptivism alone is not what affects perceptions of the reflexive.

Participant education-level. Education-level also influences perceptions of the writer's use of the accusative. It also strongly influences perceptions of her use of the reflexive and nominative, such that there is a statistically significant cross-over interaction effect that is similar to that which emerged when examining the email recipient. Recall that for some formality-related adjectives, the reflexive was rated higher than the nominative when the recipient was Nicole's subordinate, but the opposite was true when the recipient was Nicole's boss. I will now demonstrate that, for

all of the formality-related adjectives, the reflexive is rated higher than the nominative by those with a high school education, but the opposite is true for those with an advanced degree. While the survey contained 7 education-levels, for data analysis, I collapse these levels into four categories: high school, some college, college, and advanced degree.¹⁰

Across all education-levels, the accusative is rated much lower than the reflexive and nominative for all of the formality-related adjectives. For the specific attributes of *articulate*, *educated*, and *professionalism matters*, a higher education-level leads to an even lower rating of the accusative. As expected, those with an advanced degree are much more critical of the accusative than those with only a high school degree. Compared to the nominative, the accusative is rated as less articulate ($\beta = -1.37$, $SE = .56$, $p < .05$), educated ($\beta = -1.55$, $SE = .53$, $p < .01$), and as indicating that professionalism matters less to the writer ($\beta = -1.49$, $SE = .58$, $p < .05$). Interestingly, education-level only affects ratings of the accusative for these three attributes, but not for *formal* or *professional*.

In terms of the nominative and reflexive, there is an even more striking difference between participants with only a high school education and those with an advanced degree. In fact, for all five formality-related adjectives, we see a statistically significant cross-over interaction effect in which the reflexive is rated higher than the nominative by those with only a high school education, but the reflexive is rated lower than the nominative by those with an advanced degree. This pattern is illustrated in Figures 4.14–4.18. When comparing the advanced degree group to the high school group, we see that the reflexive is rated lower than the nominative for *formal* ($\beta = -1.68$, $SE = .69$, $p < .05$), *articulate* ($\beta = -1.3$, $SE = .60$, $p < .05$), *educated* ($\beta = -1.69$, $SE = .56$, $p < .01$), *professional* ($\beta = -1.57$, $SE = .60$, $p < .01$), and *professionalism matters* ($\beta = -1.4$, $SE = .62$, $p < .05$).

10. High school ($n = 69$) includes those who attended some high school or completed high school. Some college ($n = 103$) includes those who completed some college. College ($n = 222$) includes those who completed an Associate's or Bachelor's degree. Advanced degree ($n = 46$) includes those who completed a Master's or Doctoral degree.

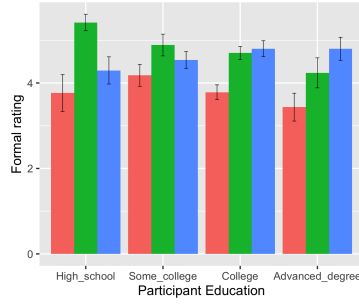


Figure 4.14: Formal

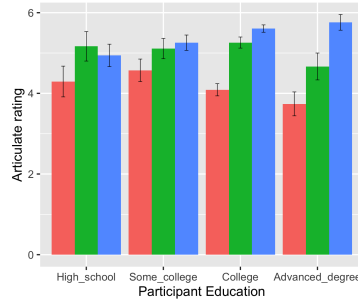


Figure 4.15: Articulate

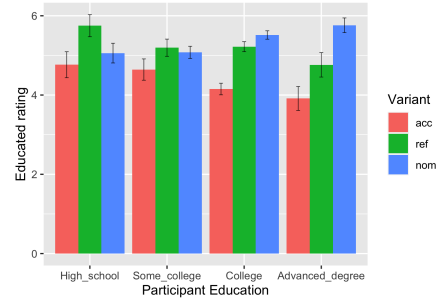


Figure 4.16: Educated

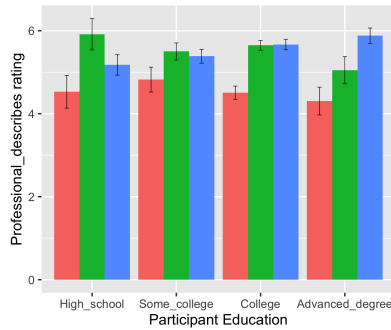


Figure 4.17: Professional describes the writer

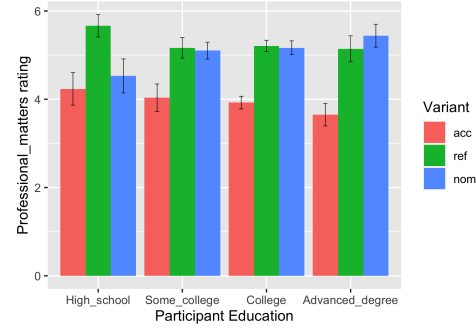


Figure 4.18: Professionalism matters to the writer

While there is a striking difference between the high school group and advanced degree group, the middle two education-levels (“some college” and “college”) show much smaller differences between the nominative and reflexive. In fact, for *professional describes* and *professionalism matters*, the some college group and college group show no difference in the perception of the nominative and reflexive. For *articulate*, we see that the some college group and the college group rate the reflexive lower than the nominative, thus patterning with the advanced degree group. For *formal* and *educated*, the some college group patterns with the high school group and the college group patterns with the advanced degree group. Although these differences are not statistically significant, they do align with the general observation that participants with lower education-levels rate the reflexive most favorably, whereas participants with higher education-levels rate the nominative most favorably.¹¹ It is possible that those with a high-school degree are less critical because they

11. Additionally, given that the number of participants in the some college and college groups is much larger than

have less awareness of the prescriptive grammar rules governing pronoun case than those with higher levels of education. However, since I do not have empirical evidence regarding whether participants judged the target sentence to be correct or incorrect, I do not make this claim. In future research, it is worth collecting data on participants' grammaticality judgments.

The interaction between education-level and pronoun variant not only reveals differences between variants for the formality-related adjectives, but also for two other adjectives: *self-important* and *humble*. As illustrated in Figure 4.19, for *self-important*, participants with an advanced degree perceived the reflexive to be far more self-important than the nominative. In contrast, participants with only a high school education perceived the reflexive to be less self-important than the nominative ($\beta = -1.4$, $SE = .68$, $p < .05$). For *humble*, a quality that is the opposite of *self-importance*, Figure 4.20 illustrates how those with an advanced degree rate the reflexive as less humble than the nominative. In contrast, those with a high school degree rated the reflexive and as more humble than the nominative ($\beta = -1.17$, $SE = .56$, $p < .01$). They even rate the accusative as the most humble variant.

the number of participants in the high school and advanced degree groups, it is not surprising that the difference between the reflexive and nominative is not as pronounced. It is thus even more important to observe that when the some college and college do diverge, they do follow the same split as high school and advanced degree, showing that education-level is a cline.

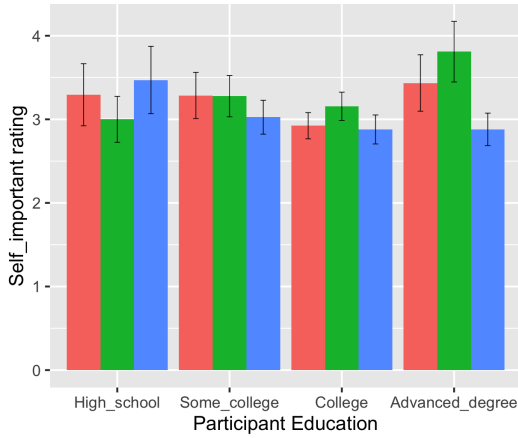


Figure 4.19: Self-important

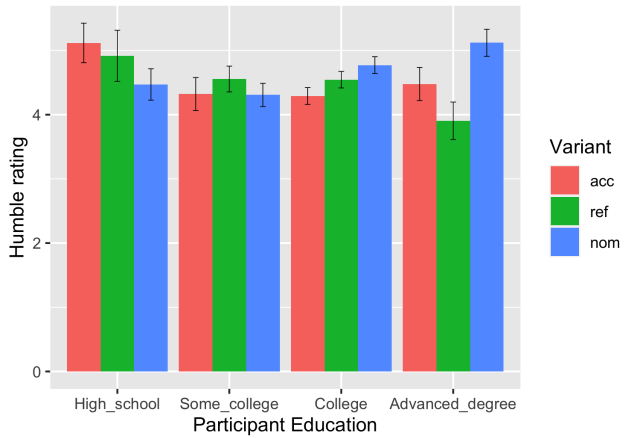


Figure 4.20: Humble

These statistically significant results for *self-important* and *humble* suggest class-based differences in perceptions of the unbound reflexive. Those with an advanced degree are more likely to perceive the unbound reflexive as self-important, because it aligns with their perception of the unbound reflexive as a case of hypercorrection in which reflexive-users are striving for a level of formality that is above them. In contrast, those with a high school degree are unlikely to perceive the reflexive as self-important, but rather as indexing social qualities related to humbleness like indirectness and politeness, because those with lower education levels are not hypercorrection critics. Additionally, as I discussed in Chapter 3, a few Internet commenters describe the use of the reflexive *myself* as a self-important. These perceptions of self-importance were scarce compared to the more prominent perceptions related to formality and professionalism, so I do not argue that self-importance is a core meaning of the reflexive *myself*. The experiment results suggest that the reflexive can lean towards *self-important* for those with an advanced degree, though this is still not a prominent meaning given that it still receives an average Likert rating less than 4 (“somewhat describes”).

In sum, participant gender, ethnicity, and age do not affect perceptions the reflexive versus nominative, which is in line with previous research on language production that did not find sex or age to be relevant predictors (Angermeyer & Singler 2002; Maddeaux 2014; Paterson 2018).

Participant education-level does impacts how participants perceive the writer's use of the reflexive versus the nominative, which is most pronounced when comparing the high school group with the advanced degree group. Those with some college or a college degree tend to rate the nominative and reflexive more similarly but, when they rate the nominative and reflexive differently, these patterns align with the general observation that those of lower-education levels view the reflexive more favorably than those with high-education levels. These results suggest that, for people with lower education-levels, the reflexive is more likely to successfully index of formality, articulateness, educatedness, or professionalism. For people with higher education-levels, their increased prescriptive standards seem to dampen the indexical potential of the unbound reflexive. However, just as discussed with regard to email participant, it does not seem to be prescriptivism alone that drives these results, but rather class-based perceptions of hypercorrection. First, education-level only affects perceptions of the accusative for three of the formality-related adjectives. Whereas, education-level greatly affects perceptions of the reflexive versus the nominative for all five-formality related adjectives. Second, education-level also affects perceptions of self-importance and humbleness, which are attributes more closely tied to hypercorrection rather than prescriptivism. As such, perceptions of the accusative seem to be solely rooted in prescriptive stigma, whereas perceptions of the reflexive seem to emerge at the confluence of prescriptivism and ideologies about hypercorrection as a striving for a level of prestige above your own. It is unsurprising that the factor of participant education-level is where perceptions of hypercorrection would play a prominent role, given that education-level loosely corresponds to social class.

4.4.5 Participant attitudes and pronoun variant

In this section, I examine how participants' attitude towards grammar and professionalism influences their perception of the writer for each each pronoun variant. I begin with participants' attitude towards grammar and show that it dramatically affects their rating of the accusative, but has surprisingly little affect on their rating of the reflexive, with a difference between the nominative

and reflexive only emerging for one adjective.

Participant attitude towards grammar. A participant's attitude towards grammar affects how they rate the formality-related adjectives. Across all five formality-related adjectives, the more a participant cares about grammar the lower they rate the accusative. Observe the steep negative slope of the accusative (red line) in Figures 4.21–4.25. The accusative is rated lower than the nominative for *formal* ($\beta = -.32$, $SE = .10$, $p < .01$), *articulate* ($\beta = -.41$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$), *educated* ($\beta = -.44$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$), *professional describes* ($\beta = -.35$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$), and *professionalism matters* ($\beta = .40$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$).

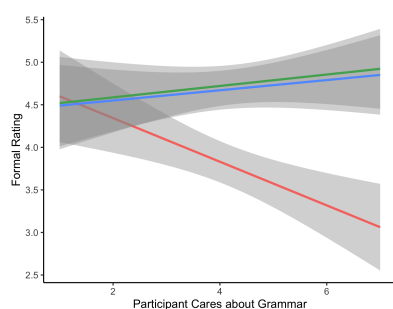


Figure 4.21: Formal

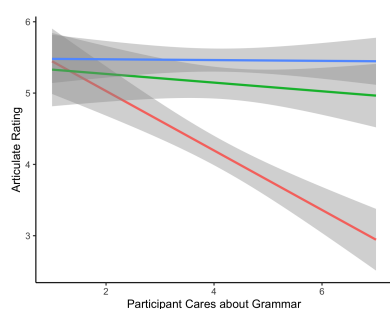


Figure 4.22: Articulate

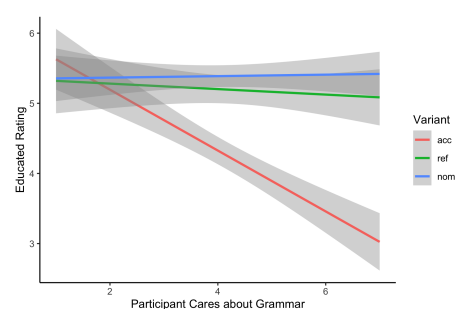


Figure 4.23: Educated

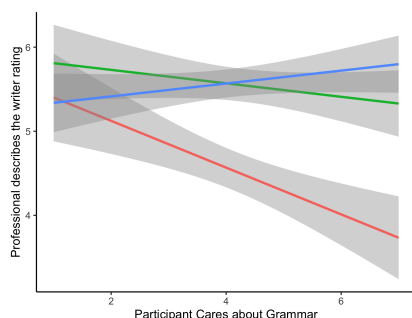


Figure 4.24: Professional describes the writer

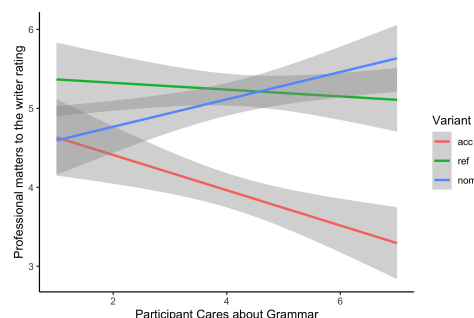


Figure 4.25: Professionalism matters to the writer

Although it is expected that people who care more about grammar are harsher critics of the accusative, it is surprising that caring a lot about grammar does not have the same effect on the reflexive. These participants have explicitly indicated that they have high prescriptive standards,

but for *formal*, *articulate*, *educated*, and *professional* there is no statistically significant difference between the reflexive and nominative. Observe that in Figure 4.21 for the adjective *formal*, the rating of the reflexive actually increases in lock step with the nominative. A statistically significant difference between the reflexive and nominative only emerges for *professionalism matters* where there is a cross-over interaction effect. Those who care less about grammar rate the reflexive higher than the nominative, whereas those who care a lot about grammar rate the reflexive lower than the nominative ($\beta = -.22$, $SE = .09$, $p < .05$). The same pattern emerges for *professional*, but it is only trending towards significance ($p = .08$).

Participant attitude towards professionalism. While caring about grammar affects perceptions of the accusative, caring about professionalism does not. Instead, it affects ratings of the nominative. As shown in Figures 4.26–4.30, the ratings of accusative (red line) actually remain almost flat, except for *articulate* and *educated* where there is a moderate decline. While ratings of the accusative remain fairly consistent, the rating of the nominative (blue line) increases dramatically in accordance with how much a participant cares about professionalism. The nominative is rated higher than the accusative for all formality-related adjectives: *formal* ($\beta = .39$, $SE = .11$, $p < .001$), *articulate* ($\beta = .28$, $SE = .09$, $p < .01$), *professional* ($\beta = .37$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$), and *professionalism matters* ($\beta = .36$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$). As for the reflexive variant (green line), its ratings actually remain consistent regardless of how much the participant cares about professionalism. The only statistically significant differences between the nominative and reflexive emerge for *formal* and *professional*. The nominative is rated as more formal ($\beta = -.28$, $SE = .12$, $p < .05$) and professional ($\beta = -.31$, $SE = .10$, $p < .01$) than the accusative by those who care more about professionalism. Importantly, the graphs illustrate that this effect is due to the sharp increase in the ratings of the nominative, not a decline in ratings of the reflexive. As I will discuss in regards to the open-ended responses, I interpret the increase in ratings of the nominative to the fact that this variant functions as unmarked in this context, so participants are not paying close attention to her way of speaking, but rather to the content of the email, which was evaluated as highly professional in the open-

ended responses to the nominative condition. Thus, it is unsurprising that participants who care about professionalism and viewed the nominative condition rate the writer more highly.

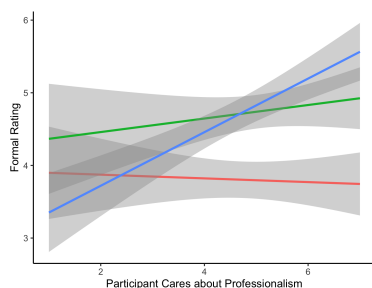


Figure 4.26: Formal

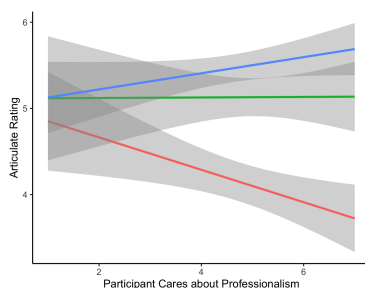


Figure 4.27: Articulate

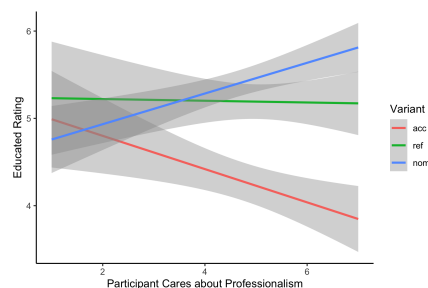


Figure 4.28: Educated

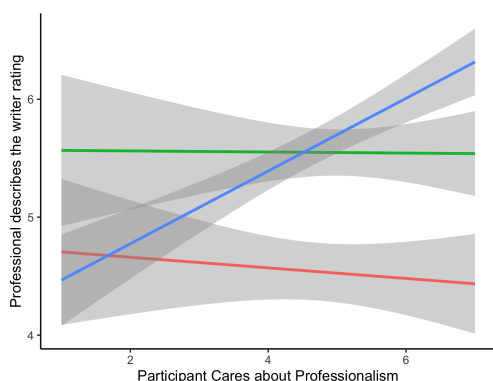


Figure 4.29: Professional describes the writer

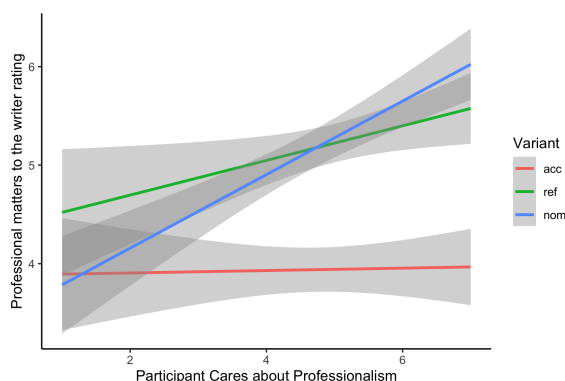


Figure 4.30: Professionalism matters to the writer

In sum, a participant's attitudes towards grammar and towards professionalism both influence how they perceive the writer for each pronoun variant, but in different ways. First, participants' attitude towards grammar greatly impacts perceptions of the accusative. The more they care about grammar the lower they rate the accusative for formality-related adjectives. Interestingly, participants' attitude towards grammar does not have the same effect the rating of the reflexive. These self-described prescriptivists are actually fairly unbothered by the reflexive. In contrast to participants' attitude towards grammar, participants' attitude towards professionalism greatly impacts perceptions of the nominative. The more they care about professionalism the higher they rate the nominative for formality-related adjectives. Interestingly, participant's attitude towards profession-

alism does not greatly impact the rating of the reflexive or accusative. In sum, caring more about grammar leads to a less favorable perception of the accusative and caring more about professionalism leads to a more favorable perception of the nominative. Neither greatly affects perceptions of the reflexive, as a statistically significant difference between the nominative and reflexive only emerges for *professionalism matters* when examining the factor of caring about grammar and for *formal* and *professional* when examining the factor of caring about grammar.

4.5 It's about prescriptivism *and* classism

By synthesizing the experiment results, it is evident that the formality-related adjectives are the group of attributes which are evaluated differently depending on whether the writer uses *me*, *myself*, or *I*. Regardless of who the recipient of the email is or the participant's attributes, the accusative is consistently rated lower than both the nominative and reflexive. This result confirms that the accusative is prescriptively stigmatized and is not at all associated with formality for any participants. Moreover, there is one participant attribute — caring about grammar — that contributes to a drastically lower rating of the accusative. That is, the more a participant self-reports being bothered by grammar errors, the lower they rate the accusative for all five of the formality-related adjectives. There are two other participant attributes — age and education-level — that also contribute to a lower rating of the accusative, but only for three of the formality-related adjectives and in a much less drastic way than a participant's attitude towards grammar does. Given that a participant's self-reported level of caring about grammar so drastically affects the rating of the accusative, I argue that prescriptivism is at the heart of how *me* in subject position is evaluated. Given that a participant's self-reported level of caring about grammar does not affect the rating of the reflexive, except for *professionalism matters*, I argue that it could not possibly be prescriptivism alone that is at the heart of how *myself* in subject position is evaluated.

It is not prescriptivism alone that impacts perceptions of *myself*, rather the confluence of prescriptivism and ideologies about hypercorrection. First, as evidence that prescriptivism does play

a role, we see that higher prescriptive standards do correspond to the instances where the reflexive is rated lower than the nominative: email recipient is boss, participant has a higher education-level, and participant cares more about grammar. Lower prescriptive standards correspond to the instances where the reflexive is rated higher than the nominative: email recipient is a subordinate, participant has a lower education-level, or participant cares less about grammar.

Second, as evidence that it is not prescriptivism alone, I have already mentioned that caring about grammar only effects ratings of the reflexive for professionalism, despite affecting ratings of the accusative for all five formality-related adjective. Similarly, participant age has no effect on ratings of the reflexive, but affects ratings of the accusative for three formality-related adjectives. What most prominently affects ratings of the reflexive versus the nominative? A participant's education-level. This participant attribute is precisely where we would expect to see the confluence of prescriptivism and ideologies about hypercorrection. Those with lower education-levels do not appear to view the reflexive as an instance of hypercorrection, rather as a successful indexing of formality-related qualities, which emerge so strongly that the reflexive is rated high than the nominative. Those with higher education-levels view the reflexive as an instance of hypercorrection and their criticism of a striving for formality leads to a dampening (but not obstruction) of the reflexive's social meaning. These ideologies about hypercorrection are also evidenced in the way that education-level affects ratings of self-importance and humbleness. Lastly, as discussed in Section 4.4.1, there is no correlation between education-level and how much a participant self-reports being bothered by grammar.

Third, as further evidence that hypercorrection plays a role, recall that email recipient affects ratings of the reflexive versus nominative, but it does not affect ratings of the accusative. The accusative is rated low regardless of who the email recipient is, but the nominative and reflexive vary with respect to who the email recipient is. When the writer is emailing her boss, she is more likely to be perceived as someone of lower social status who is writing to someone of high social status, thus contributing to an evaluation of hypercorrection. When the writer is emailing

her subordinate or coworker, she is more likely to be perceived as writing to someone of lower or equal social status, thus making hypercorrection a less likely evaluation.

4.6 Social meanings of the unbound reflexive

This experiment aimed to expand our understanding of the social meaning of the unbound reflexive *myself* as it relates to the accusative *me* and nominative *I* in subject position. Broadly speaking, the results have demonstrated that the unbound reflexive is associated with formality. Even though it is prescriptively incorrect, it does not pattern with the accusative *me*, which turns out to be prescriptively stigmatized. The reflexive is perceived more more similarly to the nominative with respect to formality-related qualities. That said, I have demonstrated that there are statistically significant differences between the reflexive and nominative, such that sometimes the reflexive is perceived as more formal than the nominative, whereas, other times the reflexive is perceived as less formal than the nominative. These differences are evidenced by cross-over interaction effects, which is especially prominent for the factor of education-level where statistically significant differences between the nominative and reflexive emerge for all of the formality-related related adjectives. Looking across the individual formality-related adjectives, those with only a high school education rate the reflexive much higher than the nominative for *formal*, *educated*, *professional*, and *professionalism matters*, but only a little bit higher than the nominative for *articulate*. Similarly, when looking at the effect of email recipient, the reflexive is rated as more formal than the nominative when the recipient is either a subordinate or coworker. The reflexive is only rated a little bit more articulate than the nominative and only when the recipient is a subordinate. While the unbound reflexive is not *inarticulate*, I do not think articulateness is a social meaning in the same way that *formal*, *educated*, *professional*, and *professionalism matters* are. As such, I argue that this experiment provides support for considering formality, educatedness, and professionalism as social meanings of the unbound reflexive.

All this said, my analysis has shown that not all participants rate the reflexive higher than the

nominative for these attributes. Participants with an advanced degree rate the reflexive as lower than the nominative for these attributes. However, these participants do not perceive the reflexive as informal, uneducated, or unprofessional. Their Likert scale ratings still exceed 4 (“somewhat describes”) and they still rate the reflexive much higher than the accusative for these qualities. Nevertheless, one could still argue that those with lower education-levels have a distinct indexical field for the unbound reflexive than those with higher education-levels. Proposing two distinct indexical fields belonging to different perceiving populations is an analysis pursued by Calder (2021) with respect to a case study by Calder & King (2022) on gendered productions of /s/ by Black and white speakers in Bakersfield, CA. Calder (2021) argues that “Black and White speakers have different indexical fields for /s/ that are intersectionally grounded with respect to race” (50). More broadly, Calder argues that linguistic features can carry different social meanings, or different indexical fields entirely, for different populations, thus also arguing that indexical fields do not belong to a feature itself but rather are part of a triadic relationship in which the indexical meanings of a feature are construed by the perceiving population. While I do not argue for distinct indexical fields for the unbound reflexive, I do show how different perceiving populations can engage with the same indexical field differently.

My experiment results and the metalinguistic commentary suggest that there are distinct perceiving populations of the reflexive *myself* in the sense that class-based evaluations of hypercorrection shape how people interpret its social meaning. Although well-educated participants and less-educated participants are interpreting this feature in different ways, I do not argue that they have distinct indexical fields. Rather, I believe that both well-educated and less-educated participants associate the reflexive with formality, educatedness, and professionalism, but the well-educated dislike when certain people strive for this social meaning. They believe the speaker is engaging in hypercorrection and, thus, striving for a class status above their own. This negative evaluation of the feature and its users can lead to the perception of additional social meanings like *self-important*, *pretentious*, *wannabe*, *try-hard*, or *poser*. These negative meanings may arise through a process in

which listeners perceive the speaker as trying to index formality, but as doing so in-authentically. It is also possible that some listeners simply automatically associate the unbound reflexive with those negative qualities.

The open-ended survey responses provide further support for my claim that even participants who rate the reflexive lower than the nominative for attributes like formality and professionalism do still recognize these as social meanings. The open-ended question was optional, but about 25 participants responded for each of the pronoun variant conditions. For the reflexive condition, there is a range of responses where some participants evaluate the writer positively and others evaluate her negatively, expressing strong feelings of personal annoyance at the writer. I look at how a participant's open-ended response relates to their Likert scale rating of how well the adjective *professional* describes the writer. The responses in (8) were written by participants who viewed the reflexive condition and rated the writer's professionalism as a 6 or 7. They write favorably about her work ethic, helpfulness, kindness, intelligence, and formality.

- (8)
- a. I would think she is a hard and diligent worker who enjoys helping her boss.
 - b. Punctual
 - c. She is very intelligent
 - d. She likes helping others
 - e. straight to the point no fluff in the email and offering additional help
 - f. Very prim and proper. Very formal but probably a good/kind boss.

Participants who viewed the reflexive condition and rated the writer's professionalism as a 5 had a mix of responses, as shown in (9). Some participants write about her favorable personal qualities, but others describe her use of *myself* as pretentious and remark that she "tries" to be professional.

- (9)
- a. Nicole seems like someone who wants to be productive and reactive, not proactive. She wants to help organize and assure everything will go according to plan.
 - b. She is caring and willing to help.
 - c. Pretentious use of myself.
 - d. She tries to be professional, but isn't strict about it.

Lastly, participants who viewed the reflexive condition and did not perceive her to be professional

wrote responses that reveal high levels of annoyance at her personality and grammar, as shown in (10). As evidenced by phrases like “typical corporate drone”, “trying to use proper grammar”, and “impress Michelle with her work ethic”, these participants are highly attuned to this feature’s association with formality and professionalism. In other words, participants who do not perceive the writer to be successfully indexing professionalism are still highly aware of this meaning.

- (10)
- a. Nicole seems like a typical corporate drone who probably doesn’t have many hobbies outside of work
 - b. She likes to blow her own horn
 - c. Sounds young. Sounds like she is trying to use proper grammar but doesn’t realize it’s not correct.
 - d. She is not skilled when it comes to grammar.
 - e. I was annoyed by Nicole’s use of the word myself.
 - f. She really wants to impress Michelle with her work ethic.

The handful of negative evaluations of Nicole that emerged in the reflexive condition differ greatly from the negative evaluations of Nicole that emerged in the accusative condition. Participants who viewed the accusative condition wrote many comments about her bad grammar, her intelligence, her level of education, her possible status as an L2 speaker, and her carelessness in proofreading, as shown in (11). Of the 24 participants who left an open-ended comment on the accusative condition, only two comments were positive in that they mentioned how she was friendly, a good worker, and helpful.

- (11)
- a. English may not be her first language?
 - b. Doesn’t care about grammar
 - c. Less educated because of poor grammar
 - d. Lower education and/or religious because of the "Alex and me"
 - e. She doesn’t seem very smart
 - f. Perhaps that she does not reread her emails to check for grammar and spelling
 - g. She is either bad at grammar, or was in a rush when typing the email.
 - h. She is not overly formal or concerned with appearances as much as team-building and friendliness.

Although these are mostly negative evaluations of the writer, participants are not attacking her

character or personality. Her erroneous use of *me* is portrayed as unintentional and could be attributed to a lack of education or a lack of proofreading. They do not criticize her personality, with one commenter even writing about her friendliness. As such, there is a stark contrast between the negative commentary on the reflexive and the negative commentary on the accusative. The reflexive evokes strong feelings of annoyance at the writer's personality and how she tries to portray herself. The accusative simply evokes negative evaluations of her grammatical abilities and education, but participants are not annoyed by it. By comparing the open-ended commentary on the reflexive and accusative, I have shown that even negative evaluations of the reflexive are attuned to the feature's core social meanings. Negative evaluations of the accusative are rooted only in "bad grammar", but negative evaluations of the reflexive are jointly rooted in both prescriptivism and ideologies about hypercorrection.

Lastly, the open-ended commentary on the nominative shows that participants perceive the nominative to be unmarked. That is, it tends to evade metalinguistic detection. As shown in (12), none of the responses drew attention to her grammar. Participants tended to focus on evaluating her based on the content and conciseness of her email.

- (12)
- a. She seems like a thoughtful person and a team player.
 - b. She's very polite and considerate
 - c. She's no nonsense and to the point. Nothing warm and fuzzy.
 - d. Nicole prefers formal workplace interactions and concise emails.
 - e. She is straightforward, no nonsense, but in a good, clear way.
 - f. She cares about doing a good job. She takes initiative. She's a good communicator
 - g. She is organized and a good planner.

In sum, the open-ended responses to the nominative suggests that, in this particular context, the nominative is the unmarked form, so social information from the content of the email is more prominent. In contrast, the prescriptively incorrect accusative is so stigmatized that almost all of the comments focus on her grammar rather than the content of the email. The reflexive generates a range of open-ended responses, demonstrating that this feature is socially fraught. That said, I have shown that participants with differing perceptions do still share the same indexical field. Partici-

pants who do not rate the writer as professional actually do mention formality and professionalism in their open-ended responses, but they mention them as (possibly failed) attempts to sound a certain way. The quantitative results and qualitative results together show that, while formality and professionalism are prominent social meanings of the unbound reflexive, the confluence of prescriptivism and ideologies about hypercorrection can lead to differing evaluations of the speaker's success in indexing these meanings. When a speaker is perceived as engaging in hypercorrection, this can even lead to perceptions of self-importance.

4.7 Future directions

Through this experiment, I have brought to light an in-depth understanding of the social meanings of the unbound reflexive *myself* as compared to alternative pronoun forms (*me* and *I*). I have also investigated how nuanced differences in email context (email recipient: boss, coworker, subordinate) affect perceptions of each pronoun variant. Lastly, I have investigated how participant demographics and attitudes affects perceptions of each pronoun variant. Given that I have proposed an analysis of the Internet metalinguistic commentary and the quantitative and qualitative experiment results that highlights how the confluence of prescriptivism and perceived hypercorrection shape listener's evaluations of the social meaning of the unbound reflexive, future experimental work on this and other sociolinguistic variables should continue to investigate the role of perceived hypercorrection and, more broadly, intention attribution.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Campbell-Kibler (2008) conducted an experiment in which one stimulus speaker was perceived as less intelligent by participants who perceived her as “trying to impress”. Results such as these support Acton's (2022) theory that a listener's evaluation of social meaning is very sensitive to their evaluation of the speaker's intention. That is, a listener who believes a speaker is trying too hard to convey a particular social meaning may end up evaluating that speaker as unnatural and, thus, view the speaker as “failing” to convey that social meaning. While it is clear from the metalinguistic commentary and experiment results that this narrative

of linguistic “failure” is relevant, my experiment did not collect data on whether each individual participant viewed the writer as intentional. Therefore, I conducted a follow-up experiment in which I collected this type of data. However, the experiment did not go as expected for two reasons, both of which are informative in their own right and should inform future experimental work.

In my follow-up experiment designed to collect data on intention, I used nearly the same experimental design as the experiment described in this chapter, but I added two questions at the end of the survey. Participants were asked a yes/no question, “Is the writer trying to impress?”, and they were asked to respond to the question, “How carefully did the writer choose her words?”, on a 1-7 pt. Likert scale. In addition to adding these two questions, I removed the variable of email recipient, such that all participants were told that the email recipient was a coworker. I removed this variable in order to reduce the number conditions, thereby increasing the sample size for each condition, but this had an unintended consequence. There were no statistically significant differences between the nominative and reflexive. While this result obstructed me from using this experiment to deeply investigate the role of intention, it actually shows just how relevant locally-situated status relationships are to evaluations of the reflexive. In other words, when the writer is emailing a boss or a subordinate there is a potentially unequal social status, so linguistic choices related to formality are more closely evaluated. When the writer is emailing a coworker, there are simply less social stakes. Any future experiment investigating hypercorrection and intention must take this into account.

Although there were almost no statistically significant differences between the nominative and reflexive, I still examined the questions targeting intention to see what insights they could provide. Regarding the question of “Is the writer trying to impress?”, in the accusative condition, 20% of participants thought she was trying to impress. In the reflexive condition, 40% participants thought she was trying to impress. In the nominative condition, 25% of participants thought she was trying to impress. The reflexive condition led to the highest rate of perceptions of “trying to impress” and

the difference between the reflexive and accusative was statistically significant ($\beta = .68$, $SE = .29$, $p < .05$). The difference between the reflexive and nominative was only trending towards statistical significance ($\beta = .45$, $SE = .27$, $p = .1$).¹² Although this shows that the reflexive is more likely to be interpreted as an effort to impress than other variants, whether a participant thought the writer was trying to impress did not affect how they rated the writer for formality-related attributes. Future research should ask this question within an experiment that where the email recipient is a boss, as I predict that this is where perceptions of “trying to impress” would have more of an effect.

Regarding the question of “How carefully did the writer choose her words?”, the average Likert rating was 3.5 for the accusative, 4.8 for the reflexive, and 4.9 for the nominative. In other words, both the reflexive and nominative led to the perception that the writer had chosen her words carefully, but the accusative led to the perception that she had not chosen her words carefully. This result aligns with my proposal that the accusative is viewed as a careless mistake, while the reflexive is viewed as an intentional social move. That said, with this follow-up experiment, I hoped to investigate how this perceived intention affected perceptions of the writer’s other qualities (e.g., her education, articulateness, and professionalism) for each variant, but there were no statistically significant differences between variants. Rather, for all three variants, the more carefully that a participant thought the writer chose her words, the higher the participant rated her for all of the friendliness-related adjectives and formality-related adjectives. In other words, “choosing her words carefully” led to more positive evaluations of Nicole. This result suggests that any experiment targeting “intention” needs to carefully consider how this is operationalized given that believing a speaker chose her words carefully actually led my participants to view her more favorably, rather than as inauthentic, insincere, or less intelligent (Campbell-Kibler 2008; Acton 2022). I do not interpret my results as counter-evidence to Campbell-Kibler (2008) or Acton (2022), rather as confirming that intention is a complicated notion. Experimental work that attempts to operationalize it must consider that there are many different flavors of intention and that the social

12. These differences were calculated using a logistic regression, $\text{glm}(\text{family} = \text{binomial})$.

relationships in the stimulus and social status of the participants may affect how intention and, potentially, hypercorrection are attributed to speakers and evaluated.

CHAPTER 5

LANGUAGE PRODUCTION IN MEDIA: IT BOTHERED MYSELF

5.1 Introduction

This chapter marks a shift from analyzing perception data to analyzing production data. The previous two chapters focused on how the unbound reflexive is perceived, in terms of its conceptualization in public discourse (Chapter 3) and the way a locally-situated usage of *myself* in a work email is perceived as compared to *me* and *I* (Chapter 4). In the present chapter, I analyze language production data from television and film. This qualitative analysis differs from the existing large-scale quantitative research on language production data that I reviewed in Chapter 2. Furthermore, thus far I have shown how this feature is predominantly associated with the workplace in metalinguistic commentary; my experiment features a workplace email and many of the examples I have collected from my own life come from workplace contexts, but, in this chapter, I intentionally choose to analyze examples that do not come from the workplace. These examples are crucial for broadening our understanding of how this feature can be leveraged socially (and comedically) and how fine-grained stances and qualities emerge in context.

I analyze unbound reflexive usage in a reality TV show (*The Bachelor*), a documentary series (*How to with John Wilson*), a scripted Saturday Night Live skit, a scripted sitcom series (*The Righteous Gemstones*), and a movie (*Austin Powers*). These are not meant to comprehensively illustrate all of the potential social meanings of the unbound reflexive, rather to provide detailed case studies of how under-specified social meaning can become highly specific in distinct ways depending on the context and how these social meanings are ideologically related. These media examples are a practical way to carry out case studies of naturally occurring data, because the full discursive context of an utterance is recorded and publicly available. Additionally, each media context has its own specific social expectations and, given the recorded nature of the shows, speakers are often more intentional and performative in their speech and self-presentation, which can make their so-

cial goals and intended social meanings easier to identify. Most prominent for scripted media, the personality and social goals of the characters have been carefully and clearly constructed throughout the course of the show or movie. Given all of these factors, these media sources allow me to do a locally-situated analysis that takes into account how the unbound reflexive contributes to the construction of certain characters and their social goals within the conversation and the larger arc of the story.

Before turning to each case study, let us revisit the indexical field for the unbound reflexive that I presented in the introduction (Chapter 1), which is not meant to exhaustively list all possible meanings, but to paint a general picture of the types of social meanings that are possible. The social meaning of the reflexive is not fixed but it is constrained: a meaning like “cool” or “youthful” or “rural” is not going to pop up out of nowhere. In this vein, although I analyze non-workplace contexts that are also not highly formalized settings, I argue that the social meanings accessed by the unbound reflexive are still intimately related to those that are canonical of a professional style, formal style, or high-class style. In other words, the social meanings in Figure 5.1 are meaningful in locally-specific ways and achieve locally-specific goals, even outside of a workplace context. For example, in analyzing a usage of the unbound reflexive in *The Bachelor*, I show how meanings like seriousness, objectivity, and formality can become even more specifically realized as indexing maturity and authority. Likewise, in *How to with John Wilson*, the reflexive’s association with competence and credibility emerges as an index of scholarly rigor and expertise. In contrast, in the Saturday Night Live skit, the meanings of the reflexive related to seriousness and formality contribute to the character’s self-presentation as put-together. In a completely different direction, the use of the reflexive in the Austin Powers movie directly indexes a high-class style in a comedically hyperbolic way that draws on class-based ideologies portraying lower-class speakers as making grammatically fumbling attempts to use upper-class speech that emerged in the metacommentary (Chapter 3).

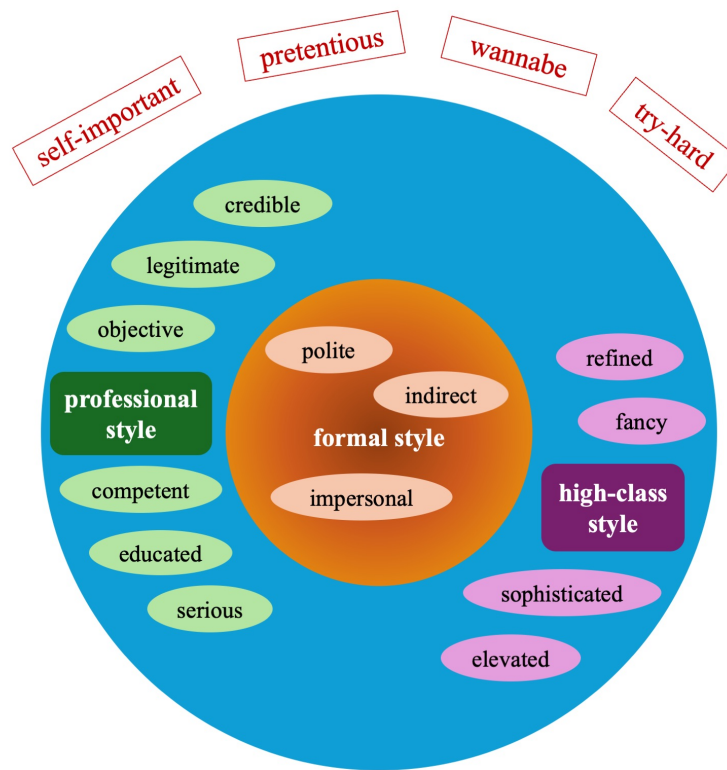


Figure 5.1: Indexical field for the unbound reflexive

5.2 Unscripted media

I begin by analyzing examples of unbound reflexive usage from two different unscripted TV shows: *The Bachelor* and *How to with John Wilson*. For *The Bachelor*, I analyze one instance of the reflexive as used by a 31 year old female contestant. For *How to with John Wilson*, I analyze two instances of the reflexive as used by a middle-aged male software designer employed by a grocery chain. In seeking to understand why a particular speaker used an unbound reflexive, rather than focus on the demographic characteristics of the speakers, I attend to the content of the surrounding conversation and how the speaker positions themselves with respect to their interlocutor. For the

speaker in each TV show, the unbound reflexive has nuanced locally-specific social meanings, but I also find that such distinct examples have in common an underlying function of legitimization: legitimizing of one's social status and/or perspectives. In analyzing these examples, I focus on the social meaning as intended by the speaker employing it, but I do incorporate information about their positionality with respect to their interlocutor and how their interlocutor (and, the television audience) responds to the speaker's linguistic self-construction.

5.2.1 The Bachelor

Reality TV, particularly dating shows, are conducive to the use of pronouns in coordination due to the fact that contestants are often speaking about themselves and others, whether during an interaction with other contestants or during an aside.¹ Furthermore, reality TV tends to be a very performative context in the sense that contestants are highly self-aware of how they are presenting themselves to a television audience and to the other contestants. After all, for a dating show like *The Bachelor*, it may be mindless TV to the viewers, but the contestants enter the show single and hope to find their future husband or wife, so the stakes are high, albeit artificially constructed. From a research perspective, the episodes and seasons of reality TV shows tend to be long and drawn out, so there is ample opportunity to understand the intricacies of different speakers' personalities, positionalities, and emotionally intricate relationships to other contestants – relationships which are negotiated from scratch since contestants arrive as complete strangers and then spend all day every day with each other. All of these factors allow me to fully contextualize an individual utterance and connect an utterance to a speakers' overall self-construction within the confines of the show.

Season 23 of *The Bachelor* features Colton Underwood (age 26) as the bachelor and about 30 single female contestants who go on individual and group dates with Colton hoping to be chosen as his wife by the end. Two of the women are Demi Burnett (age 23) and Tracy Shapoff (age

1. An aside, also called a confessional, is when a contestant is pulled aside by producers to speak directly to the camera. Asides are also common in sitcoms (*The Office* or *Parks and Rec*).

31) who became known throughout the season for their conflict, which centered around age, with Demi calling Tracy “old” and a “cougar” and Tracy finding Demi to be immature and “not old enough”. In episode 2 of season 23, there is a scene where a small group of women (including Tracy and Demi) are hanging out together, simply passing time while another group of women is on a group date with Colton. In the lounge area where they are hanging out, the group date rose is sitting on a table, which is for Colton to give to a woman of his choosing at the end of the episode. Receiving the rose is an honor that ensures the recipient is safe from elimination that episode. Demi has been jokingly suggesting she is going to receive the rose, when she suddenly and briefly picks up the rose and waves it around in front of the other women in a silly taunting way. Prior to the full episode’s release, an exclusive preview included this scene and was the focus of two pre-release articles. In *Entertainment Weekly*, Demi’s choice to pick up the rose is described as “unthinkable” and breaking the unwritten rule to “Never, *ever* touch the rose until the Bachelor hands it to you!!!”² Likewise, an article by *Refinery29* describes Demi as breaking “the biggest unwritten *Bachelor* rule”.³ Although the episode preview showed the scene where Demi picks up the rose, it did not show Tracy’s response to the incident later that evening.

Upset by Demi’s actions, Tracy discusses what happened with a few of the other women who were present. Ultimately, she decides to pull Demi aside later that evening and speak to her privately.⁴ By doing so, Tracy frames herself as mature and positions Demi as a child who needs to be taught better manners. Tracy opens the conversation by saying in a very calm and measured tone,

- (1) You know when you like walked back over and picked up the rose and like were waving it around? That like, **it bothered myself**. And like, the meaning of what it stands for, like, is a lot to everyone. And I think everyone just thinks like that it’s Colton’s to give to everyone

2. Baldwin, Kristen. 11 January 2019. “*The Bachelor* episode 2 preview: Demi does the unthinkable on a group date”. *Entertainment Weekly*, <https://ew.com/tv/2019/01/11/the-bachelor-episode-2-preview-demi-date-rose/>.

3. Lindsay, Kathryn. 11 January 2019. “One Of Colton’s Contestants Broke The *Biggest* Unwritten Bachelor Rule”. *Refinery29*, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/01/221478/the-bachelor-demi-date-breaks-rose-rule>.

4. *The Bachelor*, season 23, episode 2. Aired 14 January 2019. Interaction between Tracy and Demi occurs at 24:25 minutes.

and nobody feels like they should touch it. It took us aback.

(Tracy)

In the phrase “it bothered myself”, Tracy uses an unbound *myself* as a direct object.⁵ This utterance is striking because the reflexive does not appear in coordination and it is not even a case of long-distance binding: a first person *I* or *me* appears nowhere in the previous sentence. As such, this utterance shows that the non-coordinated use of the unbound reflexive is attested, even if extremely uncommon as established by previous corpus research (Chapter 2). Furthermore, the interaction between these two women on *The Bachelor* is far removed from a workplace context or prestigious institution. By looking at the local context of the episode and broader context of the season, I argue that Tracy is leveraging the unbound reflexive in order to take an authoritative and serious stance towards the issue at hand, which also contributes to her goal of positioning herself as more mature, formal, and socially superior to Demi. Tracy’s authoritative and serious stance is established not solely by the reflexive, but also in the way that she shifts from simply the singular “myself” to speaking on behalf of all the other women (“to everyone”, “everyone just thinks”, “nobody feels like”, “it took us aback”), which further legitimizes her beef with Demi. In addition to these discursive strategies, Tracy justifies her reaction by grounding her perspective in importance of the rose itself: “the meaning of what it stands for”, which transforms a personal annoyance into an objective statement.

Despite Tracy’s serious tone, Demi is unphased and, instead, leans into the moment as an opportunity to portray Tracy as overacting. Demi says to Tracy, “I’m totally sorry about that”, in a very casual non-genuine tone. The footage immediately cuts to an aside with Demi where she says,

- (2) Tracy’s freaking out a little bit. I could tell that she was very off-put by what I did today. She had like a frowny face on, so you could tell she wasn’t very happy about it. But haters gonna hate.

5. In this and other examples, the phrase containing the reflexive is bolded for readability. It does not indicate any type of prosodic stress.

(Demi)

With a smirk on her face, a slight giggle in the middle, and a scoff at the end, Demi uses this aside to continue to construct herself as young and carefree. The casual phrases “freaking out” and “frowny face” serve to make fun of how seriously Tracy is taking herself. Demi’s flippant reaction to Tracy’s concerns plays an important role in how both contestants construct themselves in relation to each other. After the full episode aired, an article by USA Today wrote that, “after a relatively quiet premiere, Demi emerged as the contestant everyone in the house seems to despise. Tracy is leading the charge after Demi forced herself on to Colton during the first group date before having the gall to touch the rose before he handed it out”.⁶ This description speaks to the way that Demi is seen as confident in annoying and disrespectful ways, which has prompted Tracy to “lead the charge”. Despite the way that the contestants villainize Demi, the USA today article also writes, “Look, I know we’re supposed to hate Demi, but Tracy is taking this whole thing a little too seriously. She decided that she had to set Demi straight. Here’s what that sounded like...” followed by what I quoted in (1). This commentary by USA Today supports my interpretation of Tracy’s utterance as an overt attempt to sound serious and to position herself as more mature and respectful than Demi by way of “setting her straight”.

Returning to her use of *myself*, this unbound reflexive plays a role in Tracy’s local social goal of taking a serious stance toward the rose incident and an authoritative role above Demi. These local goals align with Tracy’s broader social goal throughout the season of establishing herself as mature and Demi as childish. Given this analysis, I argue that Tracy is indexing social meanings ideologically related to professionalism, but she is not actually indexing professionalism, because this would not sufficiently capture the nuances of Tracy’s utterance. In some ways, *The Bachelor* actually contrasts starkly with the professional workplace, because contestants are expected to be highly emotional and personal, rather than to hide those qualities as is expected in the workplace.

6. Ruiz, Steven. 15 January 2019. “‘The Bachelor’ recap, episode 2: A new villain emerges”. *USA Today*. <https://ftw.usatoday.com/2019/01/the-bachelor-recap-season-23-episode-2-demi-colton>

That said, the subject matter of Tracy's utterance is precisely about the respecting and upholding unwritten rules and social expectations, which Demi is seen as treating carelessly. In that sense, the rose incident and ensuing conversation between Tracy and Demi does actually have something in common with the workplace. Tracy constructs herself as someone who is aware of social expectations, respects them, and meets them. Tracy constructs Demi as someone who is not meeting those expectations. Even when confronted, Demi is not concerned and continues to act carefree and chill. In sum, Tracy is not using the unbound reflexive in order to sound like a business person or an upper-class person, but her use of the reflexive does index ideologically related meanings of seriousness, maturity, adherence to contextual social expectations. The reflexive contributes to the legitimization of both the content of her utterance and her social positioning within the *The Bachelor* social bubble.

5.2.2 How to with John Wilson

While *The Bachelor* is a highly-curated closed environment where the contestants are fully immersed in a television set, my next unscripted examples come from *How to with John Wilson*, a casual everyday context. In each episode, documentarian John Wilson focuses on a different topic and goes around New York City striking up conversations with random people that lead the episode in interesting directions, so there is no preconceived plot driving the show and the episodes are not sequentially related. Importantly, the people he meets are simply going about their everyday lives and, until meeting John Wilson, were not planning to be filmed.⁷ In one of these episodes (S1 E3), John Wilson is exploring the topic of memory and meets a man named Chris in the grocery store. During a long conversation with Chris, Chris uses an unbound reflexive in two distinct utterances. In analyzing their conversation, I will demonstrate how the unbound reflexive contributes to Chris' desired tone of credibility, scholarly rigor, and expertise. This tone is instrumental in legitimizing

7. Since the show tends to ask for filming consent post-hoc, it is not clear whether Chris knows he is being recorded, but I suspect that this consent would have been obtained after Chris and John chat in a grocery store aisle, but prior to walking back to Chris' office and filming his computer screen.

his claims, because he believes in a theory that is widely considered to be a conspiracy theory.

John Wilson goes to a grocery store as part of his episode on memory, because he has decided to memorize a grocery list and then go to the store to see how much of it he can remember. In one of the store aisles, he meets Chris, who designs the inventory software used by grocery stores and happens to be fascinated by memory. Chris starts telling John about the Mandela Effect — a phenomenon where a large portion of society collectively misremembers something. Chris invites John to come back to his office, so that Chris can show him the inventory software and nerd out about more examples of the Mandela Effect. Most of their conversation occurs with Chris at his computer and John looking over his shoulder at the screen. Chris pulls up a picture of the car in which JFK was assassinated and says the utterance in (3) and explains how there is a Mandela Effect related to differing memories about the number of people in the car:

(3) I'm gonna bring one up that **myself and my dad** got into a little kerfuffle about.⁸

After Chris discusses the Mandela Effect for a few more minutes, he concludes his explanation with the utterance below:

(4) So, **myself and others** are really starting to look into that.⁹

While my analysis of *The Bachelor* focused greatly on how Tracy constructs herself throughout the show, particularly through contrasting herself to Demi, with regards to the two examples above from *How to with John Wilson*, my analysis focuses more on the content of Chris' discourse, because it seems to be the primary motivation for Chris' speech style. Unlike Tracy and Demi's confrontational dynamic, Chris and John have just met and their conversation is extremely friendly and John is expressing genuine intrigue and engagement with Chris' interests. In the scene where the utterances in (3) and (4) occur, the relationship dynamic is akin to that of teacher and student,

8. *How to with John Wilson*, season 1, episode 3. Aired 20 November 2020. Utterance occurs at 8:30 minutes.

9. *How to with John Wilson*, season 1, episode 3. Aired 20 November 2020. Utterance occurs at 10:33 minutes.

even though Chris is not actually a teacher and nor is he an academic researcher of the Mandela Effect. It is more of his side hobby or personal interest, so he must present himself in a way that legitimizes his knowledge and expertise with regard to this topic. Thus, I argue that he leverages the unbound reflexive as part of his effort to adopt a speech style associated with the credibility and competence that stems from professional and academic institutions.

One reason that Chris must legitimize his knowledge of the Mandela Effect is because it is a side hobby and he has no academic research experience. Additionally, Chris' claims about the Mandela Effect are widely considered to be a conspiracy theory, so it is of the utmost importance for him to sound like a credible and legitimate researcher. To be clear, the Mandela Effect itself is not considered a conspiracy theory. It is well-documented that people collectively misremember things. However, it is unknown why people collectively misremember things, so conspiracy theories have arisen. There is a substantial group of people, including Chris, who believe that the Mandela Effect is caused by multiple space time continuums (i.e., parallel universes). In sum, by looking at both Chris' speech style in the local context and the broader context of him as a believer of a conspiracy theory, it seems that the unbound reflexive indexes Chris' credibility and scholarly rigor and helps to legitimize his claims.

5.3 Scripted media

While unscripted and scripted media alike allow us to deeply analyze the context of an utterance, scripted media is unique in that a script writer is at the helm of creating an entire character and deciding their speech style well in advance, which is also influenced by the actor's stylistic choices in their embodiment of the character. The mere fact that the unbound reflexive is leveraged by script writers further confirms that this is a socially meaningful feature that has reached a high level of public awareness (whether it be subconscious or conscious). Moreover, script writers may use the feature comedically, which draws explicit attention to the feature in a way that allows for a more transparent understanding of the stereotypes connected to the feature. Even if the unbound

reflexive was not written into the script and was improvised by the actor, its usage suggests that the actor found it to be useful (and/or comedic) linguistic resource for their character in that moment.

5.3.1 Saturday Night Live

Saturday Night Live, a late night comedy show with both scripted and unscripted elements, usually contains a short comedy skit about a relevant political topic or aspect of current popular culture. In a 2021 episode from Thanksgiving week called “911 Call”, the reflexive *myself* is used by two different characters. In analyzing the first instance of the reflexive, I claim that, while this instance of the reflexive is not unbound, it is a seemingly archaic construction used to adopt a formal style: the kind of formal style that leans more towards a high-class style. In analyzing the second instance, where another character puts exaggerated emphasis on unbound *myself* in coordination, I claim that this use is drawing attention to the comedic incongruity between the character being high (on weed) and yet trying to sound put-together. This incongruity not only highlights the formality of the reflexive but the stereotype that emerged in the Internet metacommentary of reflexive-users as people who are exerting undo effort to sound more formal or intelligent than they actually are.

The “911 Call” skit is about a group of college professors who get high at a Friendsgiving party and one of them calls 911 because he thinks he is dying.¹⁰ The conversation with the 911 operator is an overtly comedic exchange because the professor is clearly not dying or unwell at all. He is in a highly-anxious state and is saying all sorts of funny things to the operator. The first usage of the reflexive *myself* comes from this professor’s attempt to explain how he is feeling to the 911 operator:

- (5) I think I might be dead. I’m at a Friendsgiving party and I smoked some marijuana and I OD’d and now I’m dying or **I believe myself to be dead**, so can you send the hospital to here please?

(Male Professor 1)

10. “911 Call”. 21 November 2021. *Saturday Night Live*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-JApCk5DoM>

While the reflexive here is not unbound, it is noteworthy because it demonstrates an association between the reflexive and formality. This use of the reflexive sounds archaic compared to the alternative, “I believe that I am dead”, thus evoking a fancier style.¹¹ The professor is also clearly trying to be polite in his tone, using “please” in his request to the 911 operator. Not only does this construction contribute to a formal and polite tone, but the syntactic structure also creates an impression that the speaker, “I”, is a distinct entity from the physical self that he is reporting on, “myself”. Interestingly, in this context, this distanced portrayal of oneself could actually correspond to the literal physical dissociation caused by the weed, rather than a more metaphorical social distancing. In sum, although this is not an unbound use of the reflexive, it is a marked use of the reflexive that evokes similar social meanings related to formality and distancing from a part of oneself.

As this professor is talking on the phone with the 911 operator, one of his colleagues comes over and grabs the phone and asks who he is talking. When the operator says that this is 911 emergency services, she says,

- (6) I am so sorry, miss. **'My;self and some other professors at Crambly College** are having a little get together and smoked a joint one of my grad students gave me. We're fine. Just some nerdy lit professors who can't handle their weed. Goodnight hun.
(Female Professor 2)

The default stress pattern of reflexives is for primary stress to occur on the second syllable: ,my'self. In this utterance, the speaker puts primary stress and emphatic stress (notated by underlining) on the first syllable and elongates the first vowel (notated by :), which makes this use of the unbound reflexive stand out to viewers and suggests that this was an intentional move by the actress or script writer. With regard to the content of her utterance, she is trying to clear things up for the 911 operator after her colleague made a complete fool of himself. She must contend with the fact that she is also high. Perhaps in other contexts, a speaker would have no reason to need to sound

11. Whether or not it is actually archaic is not particularly important, because it is most important that it sounds archaic and there is an association between old-fashioned/archaic expressions and formality.

put-together when calling 911, but in this case, the speaker really needs to make herself sound rational and lucid. Given this situation, as well as the prosodic emphasis on “myself”, I argue that this character leverages the feature in order to sound put-together, rational, and composed. The usage is comedic, because it is so blatantly incongruous with her current mental state (being high) and her colleague’s confusing ramblings.

The comedic incongruity of the unbound reflexive within the local context not only draws attention to its social meaning, but it also suggests another layer of comedy related to making fun of reflexive-users. The metacommentary demonstrated an ideology that some people who use this feature are uneducated people who are adopting a higher register of speech in order to sound more educated than they really are. Moreover, these users are portrayed as not realizing that they may be perceived as a ‘wanna-be’ or ‘try-hard’. While professors are not typically a social group seen as ‘try-hards’, this skit is a unique context where the professors are high and acting like goofy fools. When they try to talk to the 911 operator, they do their best to sound as serious as possible, but do so in such an exaggerated way that it evokes the stereotype of uneducated people trying too hard to sound educated and being mocked. The potential lower-class status of the professors is also evidenced by discursive elements of the utterance in (6) that position the professor as possibly more rural, Southern, or not prestigious. First, the professor’s use of the address term “miss” is more commonly associated with a Southern or rural background. Second, the made-up college of “Crambly College” suggests a small-town college, rather than a large prestigious university like Princeton or Harvard. Lastly, although the professor does not have a regional accent that I can pinpoint, she has a vocal creak and a hint of /ae/ raising that evokes a more Midwestern accent. All of these factors paint a picture of her as someone who is not associated with prestige.

In sum, the second professor’s use of an unbound reflexive indexes a locally specific meaning of put-together, which is part of a speech style that she hopes will make her sound rational. Because she is high and her colleague — who also used a reflexive to sound formal and polite — made a fool of himself, there is a comedic incongruity between the speech style she adopts with the 911

operator and what is going on at the party. Furthermore, this attempt (and failure) to sound put-together suggests that the skit is also drawing on the stereotype that uneducated people who adopt a higher register of speech do so in ways that may be mocked by the upper class as error-filled and excessive.

5.3.2 The Righteous Gemstones

The next set of unbound reflexive examples come from a particular character, Jesse Gemstone, in an HBO comedy series called *The Righteous Gemstones*, which began in 2019. This show is about the Gemstone family who run a megachurch empire in South Carolina. Broadly speaking, the show makes a satirical and comedic portrayal of the megachurch industry while also following the ridiculous antics of the family patriarch and his three adult children. In the first season, the oldest son, Jesse Gemstone, is the main focus of the plot because he has just returned from a prayer conference where he and other church husbands hired prostitutes and did cocaine in their hotel room. An unknown person took secret footage of this incident and is threatening to blackmail Jesse by revealing the footage, so he is determined to find the blackmailers. Over the course of these events, Jesse's character is consistently revealed as someone who is pulled in two directions: immoral immature party boy and mature religious husband. It is clear that his true self is a party boy, but he attempts to maintain a façade of being a mature religious husband, in part because he hopes to be the heir to the megachurch. These attempts are comedic and recur throughout the season. According to the HBO Max character description of Jesse Gemstone, he takes his role “seriously” even though he is “a party boy at heart” and his actions may compromise “his image as a righteous family man”:

- (7) The first-born son of Eli, Jesse takes his role in the family's glitzy megachurch seriously, even if he's a party boy at heart. A husband and father of three, his life gets turned upside down when anonymous blackmailers with a scandalous video threaten to destroy his image as a righteous family man.

Another entertainment website highlights just how important it is for Jesse to keep up “the facade he’s so perfectly maintained” even though he is not “half the holy man he claims to be”:

- (8) Challenges... keeping up the façade he’s so perfectly maintained. Jesse isn’t half the holy man he claims to be, but now he’s getting threatening text messages that contain incriminating evidence of him doing coke with a bunch of prostitutes. He’s being blackmailed, and now having to deceive his father in order to walk this tight rope correctly. Everything is closing in on him.

(Charactour.com)¹³

In analyzing Jesse Gemstone’s use of the unbound reflexive, I consider how this feature is integral to his comedically exaggerated attempts to construct his façade of a righteous family man and related conversation specific social goals. Jesse’s first usage of the unbound reflexive is an excellent demonstration of the two distinct discursive styles that mirror the two sides of his personality. In season 1 episode 2, he and his church husband friends go on a wild chase through town where they meet the blackmailers in a parking lot, run two of them over in a car, and bribe the front desk staff of a hotel to tell them where the blackmailers went. After Jesse returns home to his wife and three children, he acts like nothing happened and goes to pray out loud in his bedroom. Moonlight Sonata is playing in the background, which lends a subtle comedic effect as it contrasts with the chase scene that preceded. Jesse begins his prayer by addressing Jesus in (9). He adopts a formal speech style and uses the unbound reflexive. After a knock at the front door interrupts him, he immediately shouts profanity and yells to his family, as shown in (10). When talking to Jesus, he uses a very performatively serious tone and the use of the unbound reflexive contributes to that tone, but also makes Jesse look ridiculous because it sounds like he is addressing Jesus in a corporate rather than heartfelt tone. The immediate switch in speech style when he shouts “fuckin

12. HBO Max character description: <https://www.hbo.com/the-righteous-gemstones/cast-and-crew/jesse-gemstone>

13. “Jesse Gemstone: Character Analysis”. *Charactour*, <https://www.charactour.com/hub/characters/view/Jesse-Gemstone.The-Righteous-Gemstones>

A” calls further attention to the artificiality of his righteous family man façade.

(9) Good Afternoon, Jesus. Thank you for watching after **my family and myself**.

(10) [Knock at the front door] fuckin A. Somebody get the door, please.
(Jesse Gemstone)¹⁴

Jesse Gemstone uses another unbound reflexive in an important scene later in the season. Jesse decides to gather the other church husbands and their families and confess to what happened at the prayer conference with the prostitutes and cocaine. Jesse is standing in the middle of his living room with the other men and their families seated with their attention on him. In a short speech, he explains what happened, opening with the utterance in (11).

(11) I’m very sorry to say that **these flawed men and myself** have participated in some sinful, illicit activities.
(Jesse Gemstone)¹⁵

In this speech, Jesse Gemstone wants use the confession as a way to portray himself as an honest man for finally being truthful. His use of the reflexive not only contributes to the formality and seriousness of his speech, but also evokes a sense of distance between his self that is the speaker (the honest family man) and his self that is the sinful party boy in the story. The unbound reflexive is also accompanied by lexical items which are of a formal register such as “sinful, illicit activities” and “these flawed men”. The script writers have clearly designed this speech style to make Jesse not just sound formal but to sound over-the-top and artificial. Interestingly, 30 seconds further into his speech, Jesse says a very similar sentence to (11), but uses the accusative, “me and these flawed men”, as shown in (12).

(12) Gideon’s not the bad guy. Gideon was put into an undesirable position because of the sins that **me and these flawed men** committed at last year’s Prayer Power convention in Atlanta.

14. *The Righteous Gemstones*, season 1, episode 2. Aired 19 August 2019. Scene occurs at 28:27 minutes

15. *The Righteous Gemstones*, season 1, episode 8. Aired 6 October 2019, Scene at 24:30 minutes.

The utterances in (11) and (12) are interesting in that they form a near minimal pair in naturally occurring speech by the same speaker in the same context. This intra-speaker variation shows that multiple variants are available to him as alternatives. The unbound reflexive is part of his repertoire, not the only variant in his repertoire. There is a question of why he does not use the unbound reflexive in (12) where he is still engaging in the same speech style. It is possible that, because the unbound reflexive is highly marked, Jesse only needed to leverage it once in the opening of his speech in order to assertively establish himself. As the speech proceeds, even though he is still speaking formally, he does not need such a high density of formal features in order to maintain his serious style.

In a later episode, the unbound reflexive continues to be a feature Jesse leverages when constructing his performative façade of righteous family man, specifically in relation to his long-term life goals. Jesse’s main reason for keeping up this façade is that he hopes to be chosen by his father to take over their megachurch. In contrast, his siblings are less interested in the church and do not attempt to hide their own chaotic lives. During a family lunch after church, the patriarch Eli is encouraging everyone to attend the missionary seminar next week. Jesse responds that he and his wife will not be able to attend and uses an unbound reflexive, as seen in (13).

- (13) Well, **Amber and myself** will unfortunately have to take a raincheck. We have been invited to a formal sit-down with the Lissons. (Jesse Gemstone)¹⁶

In this specific context, the unbound reflexive contributes to Jesse’s goal of legitimizing himself and Amber as a respected Christian couple. The Lissons are a powerful Christian couple from another megachurch and it seems that Jesse mentions them in order to present himself and Amber as on the same level as the Lissons and to present his reason for missing the missionary seminar as a legitimate one. As with his previous uses of the unbound reflexive, his utterance is filled with other formal language like “take a raincheck” and “formal sit-down”, once again creating a comedically over-the-top performance of his façade. Jesse goes on to use the unbound reflexive

16. *The Righteous Gemstones*, season 2, episode 1. Aired 9 January 2022. Utterance occurs at 20:53 minutes.

again when describing why he and Amber were invited to meet with the Lissons, as seen in (14).

- (14) I imagine we were invited ‘cause they probably realize, as Daddy’s faculties are ... waning and he starts getting older and tired-er – no offense, Daddy – that **Amber and myself** are the logical next leaders (Jesse Gemstone)¹⁷

Here, Jesse’s speech style relates to his larger goal to convince his father that he and Amber should be the next leaders of the megachurch. Not only does this utterance contain other formal language like “faculties are waning” and “logical next leaders”, but it also contains verbal blunders like “tired-er” and a casual reference to his father as “Daddy”, which reveal that Jesse is stumbling as he tries to adopt a speech style that does not come naturally to him.

Based on Jesse Gemstone’s four uses of an unbound reflexive across Season 1 and 2, I have identified the ways that this feature contributes to the construction of Jesse’s character as someone whose true self is a party boy but whose goal within his family is to be perceived as a righteous family man. The script writers’ intentional use of this feature is especially evident when we consider not only Jesse’s repeated use of it, but also the fact that he is the only character in the season who uses the feature. Jesse does also use the alternatives *me* and *I* (“Amber and I” or “my wife and I”), but *myself* is leveraged in his most highly performative moments of trying to convince his audience — whether that is Jesus, his wife, or his father — that he is a mature, righteous man who is a serious candidate for taking over the megachurch. In fact, it would sound unrealistic and less impactful if Jesse always used the reflexive, rather than using it intentionally but occasionally. As a result of Jesse’s discursive choices, his over-the-top performance of formality and use of the feature *myself* create an impression of unnaturalness. As such, similar to the *Saturday Night Live* skit, the way the script writers incorporated the unbound reflexive into *The Righteous Gemstones* aligns with the negative stereotype of some reflexive-users as ‘try-hards’ who are prone to making a fool of themselves through their clunky attempts to sound formal.

Although I’ve focused on Jesse’s personality and individual goals within this family/church

17. *The Righteous Gemstones*, season 2, episode 1. Aired 9 January 2022. Utterance occurs at 21:25 minutes.

context, there is an aspect of his reflexive usage that aligns with the feature's broader enregisterment with a professional style. The entire show is satirizing the corporate nature of megachurches; the Gemstones and the Lissons even announce that they are entering into a new "business venture". Even though the reflexive is not ideologically associated with family and personal life, in this situation, the Gemstone family and their church are portrayed in a corporate way. Within this corporate-style church, the unbound reflexive *myself* plays a role in evoking a business professional type of seriousness rather than a genuine moral devout Christian type of seriousness. In sum, in *The Righteous Gemstones*, the unbound reflexive is used by Jesse to construct his public self as mature and serious, while hiding his true party boy self. This self-construction is a part of his desire to achieve certain business goals within his family's corporatized church.

5.3.3 Austin Powers

The final scripted example, from the 1997 movie *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, contains a use of the reflexive that is so ridiculous that the utterance has been immortalized in a GIF and YouTube clip. In (15), the vulgar and sexually flamboyant British spy Austin Powers goes undercover and introduces himself as Richie Cunningham:

- (15) **Allow myself to introduce [pause] myself.** My name is Richie Cunningham and this is my wife, Oprah.¹⁸

In analyzing this utterance, I will show how the comedic effect relies on the opposition between the character's true self and an exaggeratedly formal speech style, which was also important in my analysis of the SNL skit and *The Righteous Gemstones*. In the case of *Austin Powers*, this opposition is even more explicit because, in this scene, Austin Powers is dressed in disguise and pretending to be a different person with a different name. In contrast to the previous examples I have analyzed, this example draws on the reflexive's association with a high-class style rather than

18. *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*. Directed by Jay Roach, New Line Cinema, 1997.

a professional style or more generic formal style. The prominence of the high-class style is made obvious by other semiotic resources: Austin Powers is dressed as a 19th-century British aristocrat when he utters (15). His outfit is shown in Figure 5.2.



Figure 5.2: Austin Powers in disguise¹⁹

In order to fully understand the scene in which Austin Powers utters (15), it is necessary to situate it within the plot of the film. In this comedy, Austin Powers is a British spy who was famously charming in the 1960s, but was cryogenically frozen in 1967. He is revived in 1997 by the British government to help with a spy mission, which is the focus of the movie. Austin Powers' character is intended to represent the stereotypes of the Swinging Sixties in London, which was a youth movement of sexual liberation, hippie counterculture, art, music, and fashion. Austin Powers is a womanizer with a crude sense of humor and he is flamboyant in how he dresses and acts. Although he is a speaker of British English, which is typically interpreted by Americans to be a monolithic prestige variety, Austin Powers clearly represents the precise opposite of refinement, even to non-British audiences.

19. Photo from "Austin Powers' Red Suit in Las Vegas". *BAMF Style*, 2 May 2021, <https://bamfstyle.com/2021/05/02/austin-powers-imom-red-suit-vegas/>

Austin Powers' lack of refinement is especially obvious when contrasted with his spy partner Vanessa who is a beautiful, mature, poised woman. For their spy mission, he and Vanessa travel to a Las Vegas casino as an undercover couple in order to investigate a wealthy man by joining his Blackjack game. As part of his undercover disguise, Austin Powers attempts to look like an upper-class British man, but he does so with the most absurdly out-of-date outfit more akin to a 19th-century aristocrat. He wears a red suit velvet with a white cotton pullover shirt and four-layered lace jabot. As such, before he even says anything in the scene, the stage has been set for a comedic opposition between an unrefined hippie and an exaggeratedly formal style. When he and Vanessa join the game of Blackjack, Austin Powers introduces himself with the utterance in (15), referring to himself as Richie Cunningham and his spy partner as Oprah.

When Austin Powers begins his sentence with "Allow myself to introduce", he is attempting to adopt a speech style that would correspond to an upper-class English gentleman by using the reflexive *myself* instead of the expected *me*. Austin Powers then pauses mid-sentence as he realizes he has landed himself in a grammatical pickle because he must conclude the sentence by saying "myself" a second time. With the construction "Allow myself to introduce myself", the script writers were able to manufacture an egregious instance of hypercorrection that is emblematic of Austin Powers' ridiculous costume and inability to seem refined even when he is trying. The script writers' choice to use *myself* in this verbal gaffe demonstrates that there is a recognizable link between the reflexive pronoun and sounding high-class. Moreover, there is a recognizable link between overusing the reflexive pronoun and trying to sound high-class.

In addition to my own analysis of this utterance, there is also online metacommentary on this specific utterance. Specifically, an anonymous user posted in the English Language & Usage section of StackExchange with the title, "Is it normal to say 'Allow myself to introduce myself'".²⁰ The user explains that this a line from Austin Powers but they are not sure if it is an example of the

20. user487296. 12 September 2023. "Is it normal to say 'Allow myself to introduce myself'?" *StackExchange: English Language & Usage*, <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/612505/is-it-normal-to-say-allow-myself-to-introduce-myself>

common but unexpected use of the reflexive (i.e., unbound reflexive) or whether it was just a joke. Three users explain that it is a joke and all interpret it as related to class-based hypercorrection. The user in (16a) describes the hypercorrection as “trying to sound high class”. The user in (16b) explains that this is funny because of the contrast between who Powers really is (a “high-toned buffoon”) and who is he trying to sound like (“regal, elegant, or proper”). The user in (16c) refers to Austin Powers as “supposedly a suave English gentleman”, which I can only assume refers to his Richie Cunningham disguise not who he is as Austin Powers.

- (16)
- a. Austin Powers had a number of language quirks. Misuse of language is a common trope of characters trying to sound high-class. (Barmar)
 - b. The joke is that Powers is a high-toned buffoon, not regal, elegant, or proper. His script is filled with such malapropisms. (Yosef Baskin)
 - c. Presumably the joke is that Austin Powers is supposedly a suave English gentleman, but here he uses bad English. (Kate Bunting)

By unpacking this joke further, it is clear that the success of this joke relies on the script writers and audience being aware of two underlying beliefs. First, the reflexive pronoun is associated with a higher register of speech. Austin Powers did not just say something grammatically incorrect; he said something that was an intentional effort to evoke an upper-class style of speech and just so happened to be grammatically incorrect. Second, they must be aware of the ideology that when lower-class people engage in a formal register of speech, they are seen as try-hard’s or wanna-be’s and even as making fools of themselves. Although Austin Powers is not lower-class, he is definitely unrefined and exists in contrast to upper-class standards and values. The success that the script writers found in this joke demonstrates the widespread public awareness of the reflexive as formal feature and one whose misuse or overuse can be perceived as a failed attempt to reach above one’s social status. In this sense, although this example draws on the high-class association of the reflexive rather than professionalism, the feature’s formality and its potential perception as inauthentic remain present. Austin Powers and Vanessa’s social identity as British certainly contributes to the accessibility of the high-class meaning, because Britishness is associated with

sophistication and fanciness. That said, their Britishness does not fix the stylistic association as either professional or high-class. Rather, Austin Powers' use of other semiotic resources like the full outfit of a 19th-century British aristocrat invoke a high-class association. In sum, this scene in Austin Powers further demonstrates that the unbound reflexive is flexible in its meaning potential, but remains broadly associated with formality, which can emerge more specifically as a high-class style, a professional style, or simply certain stances and qualities associated with those styles.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter expands our understanding of the unbound reflexive insofar as it demonstrates, through non-workplace language production data, how locally specific social meanings emerge in context. In each case study from television and film, the unbound reflexive contributes to a character's self-presentation, speech style, and social goals in unique ways. There is a range of social meanings that emerge: some more interactionally oriented (e.g., polite), some personal qualities (e.g., competent), some closely related to a professional style, some closely related to a high-class style, and other more generally related to a formal style. Across the case studies, I argued that it would be reductive to argue that speakers are indexing meanings like "professional", "this is a workplace domain", "I am a corporate business professional", or "I am upper-class". These are possible indirect indexes — ones that are more likely to emerge in a workplace context or prestige-related setting, but in these case studies, speakers are directly indexing far more specific stances and qualities. *Austin Powers* could be an exception in the sense that he could be argued to be indexing "I am upper class", but I have also shown that he is more directly indexing the refinement and sophistication of the upper-class that so starkly contrasts with his vulgar and unrefined personality.

In proposing contextually specific social meanings for each case study, I emphasize that these social meanings are ideologically related to the broader social meanings and stylistic associations of formal, professional, and high-class that I argued for based on Internet metacommentary and the matched-guise experiment. Thus, these case studies confirm that the unbound reflexive is an

effective semiotic resource outside of workplace or prestige contexts. As an important clarification, I do not intend to suggest that in non-workplace or prestige contexts the unbound reflexive is indexing highly specific social meanings, but in workplace/prestige contexts it is simply indexing “workplace” or “upper-class”. Even within a workplace or prestige context, speakers can index the stances and personal qualities that are ideologically related to broader styles and domains. The contribution of these media case studies is not to show that locally-specific social meanings exist, but rather to illustrate how these social meanings emerge in contextually specific ways. Additionally, these case studies contribute to our understanding of the unbound reflexive by demonstrating that there is not “a workplace use of the unbound reflexive” and “a non-workplace use of the unbound reflexive” that are operating in unrelated ways. The social meaning in every individual locally-situated context (whether workplace or non-workplace) emerges differently and the successful (or unsuccessful) uptake of intended social meanings is influenced by the interlocutor, contextual factors, and class-based ideologies. However, taking into account the data from previous research (Chapter 2) and my own data (Chapters 3–5), I argue that the indexical field I proposed in Figure 5.1 accurately captures the breadth of, constraints on, and ideological connections between the potential social meanings.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has offered the first third-wave sociolinguistic analysis of unbound reflexive pronouns, which had previously received only limited attention within sociolinguistics (Angermeyer & Singler 2002; Maddeaux 2014; Paterson 2018). In order to build upon the previous research which utilized corpus methods and acceptability judgment surveys, I have utilized metalinguistic commentary, a matched-guise perception experiment, and language-production data from television media as data sources. In investigating the social life of this variable through diverse methodologies, my main goal has been to understand the indexical potential of the unbound reflexive. As presented in the introduction, my analysis bears on the following questions.

- (1) What are the potential social meanings of the unbound reflexive? How are these meanings connected to:
 - a. the morphological structure of reflexives as possessive NPs,
 - b. associations with particular speech styles, and
 - c. iconic interpretations of the reflexive's form?

Since a sociolinguistic feature is associated with a constellation of ideologically related meanings that are contextually-specific and flexible, the potential social meanings of the unbound reflexive cannot be listed exhaustively. However, I have shown that its meaning potential is related to formality in the sense that it can index indirectness, politeness, and emotional distance. It can also index meanings related to professionalism, such as competence, objectivity, credibility, and seriousness, and meanings related to refinement, sophistication, and fanciness.

Regarding how these meanings connect to the structure of reflexives as possessive NPs, I have suggested that the morphological complexity of possession can give rise to an interpretation of indirectness. Crucially, a reflexive (e.g., *myself*) has the same referent as its alternative personal pronouns (*me/I*). However, a reflexive refers to the referent indirectly in the sense that it is a more derivationally complex form. The form introduces a “self” and, then, a possessor “my”. Thus,

myself refers to the speaker as “the self that belongs to the speaker”. I have therefore argued that reflexives are semiotically available for conveying indirectness and related meanings like politeness and emotional distance. While this property of reflexives makes them semiotically available for conveying indirectness, this does not mean that they always indicate indirectness. Reflexives can also be used for distinct pragmatic functions (logophoricity and emphasis), which are uses that I treat as unrelated to the socially marked unbound reflexives that I focus on.

In terms of how the social meanings of the unbound reflexive connect to particular speech styles, I have argued that there is a prominent association with a professional speech style. This association is robustly evidenced in the Internet metacommentary where commenters report encountering the feature in a variety of business, finance, and corporate workplaces and even refer to its use in “business-speak”. The feature’s association with professionalism is also supported by my matched-guise experiment where “professional” is one of the attributes that participants ascribe to the feature. A professional style is also evidenced in the media examples. Even though they are from non-workplace contexts, they show how qualities and stances related to professionalism can be invoked outside of the workplace. In addition to a professional style, the Internet metacommentary suggests an association with a high-class style of speech, an association that is leveraged comedically in the *Austin Powers* example that I analyze in Chapter 5. Since a professional style and high-class style are both formal styles, broadly speaking, I consider a formal style to be a core stylistic association of the unbound reflexive. This association with formality is not only supported by my own primary data sources, but also by previous research (Angermeyer & Singler 2002; Maddeaux 2014).

In terms of the iconic interpretations of the reflexive’s linguistic form, I have investigated this solely through the Internet metalinguistic commentary, as this is where it is possible to document folk ideologies about this feature. More specifically, iconicity emerges in folk ideologies that seek to rationalize a link between a feature’s form and its social meaning. One way metacommenters engage with the form of the reflexive is by emphasizing how it is longer (i.e., added syllable/-

morpheme/letters) than its non-reflexive counterparts, such as *I/me/you*, which are described as short, plain, and ordinary. They interpret the length of the reflexive as iconic of excess. Excess is described in different ways by different commenters: excess can correspond to an elaborate discursive style or to self-aggrandizement. In this way, the excessive length of the reflexive is used to rationalize social meanings related to a high-class style and to self-importance. They also interpret the length of the reflexive as making it more indirect and polite than non-reflexives, which are described as direct and stark.

Missing from the questions in (1) is a question that is fundamental to the study of many sociolinguistic variables. How does the feature's social meaning potential relate to its correlates with macro-social categories? For the unbound reflexive, this question is not applicable, because both previous research and my own data suggest that this feature does not have any strong demographic correlates. Unlike many other sociolinguistic features, its social meaning does not seem to have its beginnings as an *n*-th order indexical (Silverstein 2003) or as an indicator (Labov 1972a). The unbound reflexive is not completely unique in this way. For example, affective demonstratives are a widely used stylistic resource whose social meaning does not have any origins in socially stratified language variation (Acton & Potts 2014).

Although the unbound reflexive does not have macro-social correlates, macro-social categories that inform speakers' and listeners' identities and ideologies are still highly relevant to how this feature is used and perceived. More specifically, social class and education-level emerge in the Internet commentary and matched-guise experiment as influential in how this feature and its users are evaluated. As such, this dissertation has also addressed how prescriptivism, standard language ideology, and class-based ideologies about hypercorrection influence listeners' evaluation of the feature. For example, in the metacommentary chapter, I demonstrated how people tend to view this feature as prescriptively incorrect, but they still associate it with formality. Throughout the metacommentary, people grapple with the tension that emerges from a feature that is prescriptively incorrect (in their eyes) and yet formal. This tension is also one of the characteristics of this

sociolinguistic feature that makes it so theoretically interesting. Prescriptively incorrect features are commonly associated with working class and/or non-white language varieties, because prescriptive standards are modeled after the speech of the educated (Lippi-Green 1993). Accordingly, the social meanings of prescriptively incorrect morpho-syntactic features tend to be derived from anti-establishment stances (Eckert 2019). The unbound reflexive shows that this is not necessarily always the case. That said, while metacommenters view the feature as incorrect, this does not indicate that all language users view the feature as incorrect. What proportion of people and what types of people view the feature as incorrect is a question for future large-scale experimental research. Regardless, this is definitely a feature whose correctness is highly fraught in ways that are not typical of other features that index formality.

While most of the metacommenters view the unbound reflexive as incorrect and are critical of people who use it, their commentary suggests that they are not simply critical of grammar errors, but they are critical of the way that people use the feature to strive for formality. This striving for formality (or politeness, intelligence, etc.) is perceived by some commenters as revealing inauthenticity. In other words, unbound reflexive-users are perceived as wannabes who are presenting themselves as more elevated than they really are. In analyzing the matched-guise experiment, I have demonstrated how these beliefs are also evidenced in how participants of different education-levels have slightly different perceptions of the unbound reflexive. While all participants rate the reflexive and nominative (*myself/I*) as much more formal/articulate/educated/professional than the accusative (*me*), there are still some subtle differences between the reflexive and nominative. For example, those of lower education-levels rate the reflexive as more formal/educated/professional than the nominative, whereas those of higher education-levels rate the reflexive lower than the nominative for those qualities. Based on the combination of the experiment results and meta-commentary, I argue that it is not prescriptivism alone that dampens the indexical potential of the reflexive. Rather, it is the confluence of prescriptivism and class-based ideologies about hypercorrection.

The unbound reflexive is not an instance of hypercorrection in the traditional variationist sense of an over-application of a grammatical rule or frequency-crossover patterning (Labov 1972a). Instead, I note that the feature's perception aligns with the sense of hypercorrection as a phenomenon in which speakers of a lower prestige variety attempt to imitate a more prestigious variety (Gumperz 1958, as cited by Janda & Auger 1992: 201). While I argue that this feature can be *perceived* as hypercorrection by some listeners, I do not necessarily suggest that "reaching for prestige" is always a speaker's intention nor an inevitable evaluation. Furthermore, I aim to emphasize that hypercorrection is not something we should simply assign wholesale to a linguistic feature or to a group of speakers. That is, people's perceptions of whether or not a speaker is hypercorrecting are highly dependent on the class identity of the listener and the assumed class identity of the speaker. Attributing hypercorrection to a speaker is also influenced by the interactional context. In my experiment, the social status of the email recipient (boss, subordinate, coworker) affects whether the writer is perceived as hypercorrecting.

As a consequence of sociolinguistics shifting away from the macro-social focus of the first wave and towards the stylistic focus of the third wave, research on hypercorrection has naturally faded. Hypercorrection was most prominent in Labov (1972a) who analyzes the frequency of usage of certain phonological variables across different socioeconomic classes. Upon finding that the lower-middle-class speakers go beyond the highest-status group in their tendency to use the forms considered correct and appropriate for formal styles, he refers to this phenomenon as hypercorrection (Labov 1972a: 126). In examining both their behavior and their self-evaluations, he argues that members of the lower-middle-class are the most sensitive to social pressure from above and their linguistic insecurity is evidenced in their conscious striving for correctness. Labov (1972a) situates hypercorrection as a behavior — a phenomenon that can be documented in the lower-middle-class's language use and attitudes. In this way, hypercorrection is something that manifests in language production. While I do not disagree with Labov's findings or decision to theorize hypercorrection in this way, I do seek to suggest that linguists should also theorize hypercorrection as

something that a listener can ascribe to a speaker. What does it mean for a listener to perceive their interlocutor to be hypercorrecting? What types of listeners are likely to perceive their interlocutor as such? What types of speakers are likely to be perceived as such? Whether we resurrect the term “hypercorrection” or not, it seems worthwhile for third-wave sociolinguistics to explore these questions. For instance, beyond simply considering individual listeners, under the framework of the listening subject (Inoue 2003; Rosa & Flores 2017), we could consider how there may be an educated upper-class listening subject that constructs certain speakers’ style shifting practices as hypercorrection.

Finally, while my dissertation focuses on the social meaning of reflexives, in the metacommentary chapter and the experiment chapter, I have considered how the reflexives relates to corresponding alternative variants (*me/I/you*). The Internet metacommentary shows that *myself* is seen as socially meaningful in ways that are distinct from both *me* and *I*. People view the multi-syllabic length of the reflexive as making it more indirect and excessively verbose than the alternatives *me/I*. However, *myself* also shares certain similarities with both *me* and *I*. In subject position, both *me* and *myself* are considered to be prescriptively incorrect (in the eyes of the metacommenters), so they carry the social risks of committing a grammatical error. On the other hand, both *myself* and *I* are associated with formality, whereas *me* is seen as informal. Although *myself* and *I* are similar in their association with formality, *myself* still distinguishes itself from *I* in that it is strongly associated with a very specific social context: the workplace. *Myself* evokes a professional or high-class style. While *I* is very compatible with these styles, language users do not seem to view *I* as being indexical of those styles. Aside from the semiotic usefulness of *myself*, previous research has shown that its multisyllabic structure allows speakers to balance the phonological weight of NPs in coordination: *myself* is favored when coordinated with a long NP or when in a list of multiple NPs. In sum, *myself* operates in relation to its alternatives *me/I*, but that does not mean its social meaning is simply oppositional to either *me* or *I*.

Given the complex relationship between *me*, *myself*, and *I*, I conclude by emphasizing that

my findings support Campbell-Kibler's (2011) research on (ING) in which she argues that each variant is not "the social flip side of the same coin" (436). Concretely, her experimental study shows that *-ing* increases perceptions of intelligence/education/articulateness, but *-in* is not simply the opposite. The *-in* guise and the neutral guise do not differ in terms of perceptions of intelligence/education/articulateness. Rather, the *-in* variant affects perceptions of formality: *-in* makes a speaker sound more casual, but *-ing* does not necessarily make a speaker sound more formal. Campbell-Kibler (2011) suggests that "the two variants of (ING) appear to have different meanings, not merely in the simple sense of representing opposing poles such as educated/uneducated or formal/informal, but in the sense of operating along different continua" (435). Since these variants of the same variable function somewhat independently, Campbell-Kibler (2011) argues that third-wave approaches need to more robustly interrogate if the sociolinguistic variable is a social and cognitive reality. In terms of the unbound reflexive, I similarly argue that the reflexive is not simply the social flip side of an alternative variant. Moreover, in the first person singular, there are three variants: *me*, *myself*, and *I*. They are not flip sides of a three-sided die nor are they all simply positioned at different points on a two-dimensional continuum of formality. Rather, as Campbell-Kibler (2011) says, "each variant is tied to a particular set of meanings, socially related to but distinct from those of its alternate[s]" (435). *Myself* has a robust social life of its own that should not be reduced to merely an opposition to *me* or *I*. Importantly, the lack of an oppositional relationship does not diminish the importance of these alternatives. Rather, it highlights the importance of treating the relationship between semantically equivalent pronoun forms as complex and multi-dimensional.

In Labov's 1972 book, "Sociolinguistic Patterns", he opens by telling the story of how this book came to be. At one point, he writes,

In 1966, Weinrich proposed to Marvin Herzog and myself that we write a joint paper on "Empirical Foundations for a Theory of Language Change" for a conference at the University of Texas. (Labov 1972a: xv)

Even Labov himself used unbound *myself* in coordination, but it would be many decades until

unbound reflexives were themselves the subject of sociolinguistic research. Furthermore, in the decades that unbound reflexives were awaiting robust investigation, sociolinguistic methods and theory expanded and shifted in fundamental ways (Eckert 2012). With this dissertation, I aim to have laid the foundation for third-wave research on pronoun case variation to proceed forward without leaving behind *myself*, *yourself*, *herself*, or any of *ourselves*.

APPENDIX

QUALTRICS SURVEY

Introduction

Welcome!

We invite you to participate in a research study on language and perceptions.

In this survey, you'll be presented with a written email. We want your opinion on how you think the person who wrote the email will be perceived. Your responses will help us in training a computer program to better understand what information can be guessed about a person based on how they talk or write.

You must be a fluent user of English and be able to read a screenshot of a sample email in order to participate in this survey. The survey is mobile-compatible, but if possible, please take the survey on a desktop or laptop computer.

- ☐ I declare that I am a fluent user of English
- ☐ I declare that I am able to read a screenshot of a sample email
- ☐ I declare that if I have access to a computer, I will use it to complete the survey.

Consent

Consent Form

In this survey, you will read a short passage and answer some questions.

There are no risks or benefits involved in this study. You will be paid for your participation at the posted rate. You will not be paid for partial completion. Your responses are anonymous, and your privacy will be maintained in research resulting from the study. Your participation is voluntary and you have the right to refuse consent or withdraw consent at any time, in which case you will be given the option to return your submission on Prolific. If you have any concerns about this study, feel free to contact University of Chicago Social & Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office by phone at (773) 702-2915, or by email at sbs-irb@uchicago.edu, and reference study IRB22-0001. A detailed consent PDF is available [here](#).

If you consent and would like to continue to the survey, please select "I agree". If you do not consent, please select "I disagree".

I have read the consent form and consent to participating in the survey.

- ☐ I agree
☐ I disagree

Prolific ID

What is your Prolific ID?

Please note that this response should auto-fill with the correct ID

Context

boss
condition

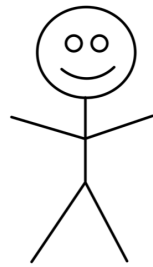
This is Nicole. She is sending an email to her boss Michelle who is leading a workshop the next day.

subordinate
condition

This is Nicole. She is sending an email to her subordinate Michelle who is leading a workshop the next day.

coworker
condition

This is Nicole. She is sending an email to her coworker Michelle who is leading a workshop the next day.



Nicole



Michelle

Nicole is sending an email to her ____ .

Stimuli and Attributes

Please read the email below that Nicole sent. We've highlighted a part of it, which you'll be asked to focus on when answering the questions to follow.

nominative
condition

room change for your workshop tomorrow

Inbox x



Nicole <nicole@company.com> 1:15 PM (0 minutes ago) ☆ ↩ ⋮
to me <michelle@company.com>

Michelle,

The workshop you are leading tomorrow at 2pm has been moved to Room 304 instead of 308. Alex and I will get there early to make sure the chairs and tables are arranged. Let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Nicole

accusative
condition

room change for your workshop tomorrow  

 Inbox x

 **Nicole** [redacted] <nicole@company.com> 1:15 PM (0 minutes ago) ☆ ↶ ⋮
to me <michelle@company.com>

Michelle,

The workshop you are leading tomorrow at 2pm has been moved to Room 304 instead of 308.
Alex and me will get there early to make sure the chairs and tables are arranged. Let me know
if you have any questions or concerns.

Nicole

reflexive
condition

room change for your workshop tomorrow  

 Inbox x

 **Nicole** [redacted] <nicole@company.com> 1:15 PM (0 minutes ago) ☆ ↶ ⋮
to me <michelle@company.com>

Michelle,

The workshop you are leading tomorrow at 2pm has been moved to Room 304 instead of 308.
Alex and myself will get there early to make sure the chairs and tables are arranged. Let me
know if you have any questions or concerns.

Nicole

Which best describes what the email is about?

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| ☐ fundraiser | ☐ kitchen items |
| ☐ staff meeting | ☐ new hire |
| ☐ workshop room change | ☐ finances |

**Based on the highlighted part of the email in particular,
please tell us what you would guess about Nicole, the
person who wrote it.**

How old do you think Nicole is? Please slide the bar to indicate
your response.

16 24 33 41 50 58 66 75 83 92 100

How much do you think sounding professional matters to Nicole?

doesn't matter at all to her				matters a moderate amount			matters a lot to her
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
☐	☐	☐	☒	☐	☐	☐	

We are interested in whether you read directions. To show you have read the instructions, check only the "none of the above" option below

☐ Distracted	☐ Bored
☐ Coffee	☐ Excited
☐ Pasta	☐ Donuts
☐ Hungry	☐ None of the above

Please read the descriptions listed below and then tell us how well you think each of these adjectives describes Nicole, who wrote the email.

	Does not describe Nicole at all			Somewhat describes Nicole			Describes Nicole extremely well
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Educated	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Professional	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Articulate	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Down-to-earth	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Blunt	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Self-important	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Relatable	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Formal	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Friendly	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Please select number 1	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Humble	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Is there anything else you can guess about Nicole or that you think others might guess about her? (optional)

Survey-taker demographics

Now please answer a few questions about yourself.

How much does it bother you when people make grammar mistakes?

does not bother me at all			somewhat bothers me			bothers me a great deal
1			4			7
☐	2	3	☐	5	6	☐

How much does sounding professional matter to you?

doesn't matter at all			matters a moderate amount			matters a lot
1			4			7
☐	2	3	☐	5	6	☐

What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Since you selected "Other", you have the option to write your gender below. (Optional)

What is the highest level of education you've attained?

- ☐ Some high school
- ☐ Completed high school or GED
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ Completed Associate's degree
- ☐ Completed Bachelor's degree

- ☐ Completed Master's degree (MA, MS, MBA, etc.)
- ☐ Completed Doctoral degree (PhD, MD, JD, etc.)

If there is any other information about yourself that you feel is relevant, you may share it below. (Optional)

If you have any feedback to help us improve the survey itself, please share it below. Thank you! (Optional)

End of survey message

Thank you for taking part in this study. Please click the button below to be redirected back to Prolific and register your submission.

Powered by Qualtrics

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