Sig and sig själv

In Swedish, transitive verbs like (1a) require, or strongly prefer, the complex reflexive sig själv if the antecedent is a coargument, while those in (1b) prefer the bare simple reflexive sig.

(1) a. Long reflexive sig själv: hata, föredra, förstå, angripa, förakta, älska, (be)straffa, åtala, kritisera, ange, avguda, använda (som)', laga, kämna, lura, framstålla (som), undervisa, hylla
b. Short reflexive sig: tvätta, raka, gömma, rädda, förnedra, upprepa, skydda, försvara, unna kalla, hänga, förklara, försörja, utbilda, fråga, rättfärdiga, vässa, identifiera, frigöra, sköta

This contrast, first noted by Hellan 1988:108 ff. for Norwegian and by Everaert 1986:204 for Dutch, has been much discussed, and plays a role in Evans & Levinson’s 2009 argument against UG. It has generally been interpreted as pragmatic, the idea being that sig occurs with stereotypically “self-directed” verbs, while sig själv occurs with “other-directed” verbs (Kiparsky 2002, König & Vezzosi 2004, Gast 2006, Burzio 2010). This is at best a descriptive generalization, which does not explain why co-argumenthood should be relevant. Moreover it is not quite correct because the uses of sig and sig själv systematically overlap in certain classes of cases. For example, verbs denoting actions performed on the body allow sig even if they denote a stereotypically “other-directed” activity:

(2) krittla sig (själv), massera sig (själv), arkbusera sig (själv), halshugga sig (själv)

Since one more often tickles, massages, and executes others than oneself, the generalization does not predict the availability of bare sig with these verbs. For the corresponding Frisian reflexives, Reuland & Everaert (2010) propose that subject experiencer verbs (admire, love, hate) take himsels, and agentive verbs (wash, defend) take him. This is wide of the mark; Frisian himsels and him actually parallel that of the other languages very closely (Kiparsky 2012).

I propose that själv marks the reflexive sig as coreferential with a coargument bearing the Agent Theta-role. The marking is preferred in proportion to the contextual probability of the disjoint reference reading, and by an implicature, bare sig is then interpreted as not coreferential with a coargument bearing the Agent Theta-role, in contexts where such an interpretation is consistent with Binding Theory.

It follows immediately that non-thematic objects can never have själv, e.g. bemöda sig (*själv) om, bry sig (*själv) om, intressera sig (*själv) för, se sig (*själv) om(kring). It further follows that sig is required if its antecedent is outside of the thematic domain of its predicate. Thus sig själv may not have an antecedent outside its clause. Hence (3a) is unambiguous, whereas (3b) is ambiguous:

(3) a. Generalen, tvingade översten att kritisera sig, ‘The general forced the colonel to criticize him/himself.’

b. Generalen, tvingade översten att försvara sig, ‘The general forced the colonel to defend him/himself.’

Since själv is interpreted in a thematic domain, contrasts such as Han såg sig (själv) i TV versus Han såg sig (??själv) tvungen att lämna förhandlingarna are also predicted (the latter is of course OK with contrastive focus on själv).

More interestingly, we predict a distinction between between causative and non-causative verbs. Verbs like (4) may have a causative interpretation with sig, but not with sig själv:

(4) a. Generalen, tvingade översten att kritisera sig, ‘The general forced the colonel to criticize him/himself.’

b. Generalen, tvingade översten att försvara sig, ‘The general forced the colonel to defend him/himself.’
So *tatuera sig* can mean = *låta tatuera sig* ‘have oneself tattooed’, but *tatuera sig själv* can only mean ‘tattoo oneself’. This follows since the subject is a coargument of the Patient argument in the non-causative but not in the causative.

Contrasts like *beundra sig själv* ‘to feel admiration for oneself’ versus *beundra sig* (t.ex. *i spegeln*) ‘to preen, to admire oneself (in a mirror)’ (Hellan 1988) can be understood on the assumption that the Agent is coreferential with the Theme in the former case, but non-coreferential in the latter case, where the admirer is a person and the thing admired is a body, physical shape, or appearance. A similar analysis can be given for body-directed actions like those in (2).

A final argument is furnished by older Swedish, where *sig* is sometimes used in a reciprocal sense. Our analysis correctly predicts that it *sig själv* at this stage is never reciprocal, e.g. 1454 träffade sig (*själv*) i klostret två kungar.

In the final segment of the talk I connect the analysis to other cases where thematic roles constrain the antecedent in anaphora, in particular to nominalizations.

**References**


