Weak and strong reflexives in Dutch*

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Dutch has two reflexive pronouns, *zich* and *zichzelf*, which distribute differently but not complementarily. The short form counts as weak by the standard criteria: it dislikes being stressed, topicalised, conjoined, and so on; the long form is strong. Neither form is marked for gender, and both will be glossed 'REFL':

(1) a. Hij heeft zich/zichzelf geschoren.
         he has REFL shaved
     b. Hij heeft *ZICH/zichZELF geschoren.
     c. Hij heeft *zich/zichzelf en zijn hond geschoren.
         he has REFL and his dog shaved

The division of labour between *zich* and *zichzelf* is usually explained in syntactic terms. It has been proposed, for example, that it is to be accounted for by stipulating two overlapping binding domains. I want to argue, however, that syntactic approaches are on the wrong track, and that semantic and pragmatic factors are more relevant than syntactic ones. In the following I explore some of the ways the distribution of weak and strong reflexives is determined by content as opposed to form.

In practice, the bulk of the tokens of *zich* are licensed by so-called 'inherently reflexive' environments, like the following:

- attitude verbs: *zich herinneren* 'to remember', *zich schamen* 'to be ashamed', *zich afvragen* 'to wonder'
- inchoative verbs: *zich verspreiden* 'to spread' (as said of a rumour, for example), *zich manifesteren* 'to become manifest'
- grooming verbs: *zich wassen* 'to wash (oneself)', *zich scheren* 'to shave (oneself)'

It is generally assumed that in contexts like these *zich* is not an argument, and in most cases this seems intuitively correct. (A possible exception would be the grooming verbs, which occur with *zichzelf* as well as *zich*, but presumably these verbs are ambiguous between reflexive and transitive readings.)

Although it may not be clear that we can define inherent reflexivity as such in semantic terms, it is obvious that many subclasses of inherently reflexive verbs are semantically motivated. This is one way in which the distribution of *zich* vs. *zichzelf* is influenced by semantic factors, and statistically it is significant too: Everaert (1986) estimates that inherently reflexive contexts account for over 90% of the occurrences of *zich*. However, the linguistic literature has taken a greater interest in the distribution of reflexive pronouns occurring outside inherently reflexive environments, and that is what the remainder of this paper will be about.

It seems to me that the essential difference between *zich* and *zichzelf* is quite simple. Whereas the strong reflexive can bear stress, the weak form cannot, so whenever the context requires emphasis, *zichzelf* must be used; otherwise *zich* may be used. This explains the data in (1), for example, and further corroboration is provided by observations like the following:

(2) a. Hij stond voor de spiegel en bekeek *zich/zichzelf.
         he stood in-front-of the mirror and looked-at REFL
     b. Hij stond voor de spiegel en bekeek zich/zichzelf nog eens goed voordat hij uitging.
         he stood in-front-of the mirror and looked-at REFL again well before he went-out

In (2a) *zichzelf* must be used, but in the corresponding position in (2b) *zich* may be used also. This contrast correlates with the fact that the object NP in (2a) carries more emphasis, presumably because it occurs in sentence-final position, whereas the corresponding expression in (2b) may be destressed.

The contrast in (3) is explained along the same lines: locative prepositions like *naast* 'next to' may be emphasised, as a consequence of which their objects may be destressed; the benefactive preposition *voor* 'for', on the other hand, is not normally stressed, so that the accent must go to its object, especially if the PP occurs in sentence-initial position:

(3) a. Naast zich/zichzelf zag Ada een konijn.
         next to REFL saw Ada a rabbit
     b. Voor *zich/zichzelf kocht Ada een stropdas.
         for REFL bought Ada a necktie

It is often said that in constructions like (4), *zich* and *zichzelf* are in complementary distribution, and that the weak reflexive must be bound by the (overt) subject, while the strong reflexive can only be bound by the object. This is not correct however: the subject may well act as an antecedent to the strong reflexive, provided the latter is contrastive—which is in line with the proposed analysis.

(4) Zij_1 wilde hem_2 niet voor $\text{zich}_{1,*2}/\text{zichzelf}_{1,2}$ laten werken.
    she wanted him not for REFL let work
    'She didn't want to let him work for her/himself.'

Predictably, the pattern changes if the benefactive PP is topicalised (cf. (3b)):

(5) Voor $\text{zich}_{*1,*2}/\text{zichzelf}_{1,2}$ wilde zij_1 hem_2 niet laten werken.
    for REFL wanted she him not let work

All syntactic theories that I know of seek to capture the alleged fact that the strong reflexive in (4) can only be coindexed with the object *hem*, and at least to the extent that they succeed in doing so, they are wrong. Another datum that is widely accepted is that the weak pronoun in (4) can only be bound by the subject NP. This observation holds in many cases, but not across the board, as witness the following:

(6) Zij_1 wilde hem_2 een kamer voor $\text{zich}_{1,2}/\text{zichzelf}_{1,2}$ laten boeken.
    she wanted him a room voor REFL let book
    'She wanted him to book a room for himself/her.'

In what is generally acknowledged to rank among the most important contributions to semantics of the last decade, Beaver (1993) introduced the Eyebrow Index, which is a measure of surprise value. In a nutshell, Beaver's proposal is that a state of affairs α has a higher Eyebrow Index than β iff α is more remarkable, and therefore causes eyebrows to be raised higher, than β. In part, the division of labour between *zich* and *zichzelf* can be explained by assuming that the former is associated with a lower Eyebrow Index than the latter. More accurately: the higher the Eyebrow Index of a given coindexation, the more likely it is that a strong reflexive will be used for expressing it. The following minimal pair supports this hypothesis:

(7) a. Zij bekeek zich/zichzelf in de spiegel.
        she looked-at REFL in the mirror
    b. Zij bespuugde *zich/zichzelf in de spiegel.
        she spat-at REFL in the mirror

Looking at oneself in the mirror is an utterly unremarkable thing to do; that is what mirrors are for, in fact. But spitting at oneself in the mirror is most unusual; it is definitely not what mirrors are for. Whence the contrast between (7a) and (7b).

If Eyebrow value plays a role in the way I suggest, we should at least sometimes be able to improve the acceptability of *zich* by manipulating the context. The following example shows how it can be done. The meaning of the transitive verb *toedienen* 'administer' (e.g. of medication) is such that

its subject and indirect-object arguments will be disjoint by default, so if we want to use this verb for expressing that someone took opium herself, we normally have to use a strong reflexive, as witness (8a):

(8) a. De zuster diende *zich/zichzelf opium toe.
         the nurse administered REFL opium PART.
     b. Betty dient zich/zichzelf weer eens opium toe.
         Betty administers REFL yet again opium PART.

By contrast, (8b) would be acceptable if it were common knowledge that Betty takes opium on a regular basis. In such a scenario the Eyebrow Index of coreference between subject and indirect object is low, and *zich* is fine.

   Two of the generalisations that figure prominently in the syntactic literature are (a) that *zich* must be bound by a subject, while *zichzelf* may be bound by a non-subject, and (b) that *zichzelf* can be bound by a co-argument, while *zich* cannot (e.g. Reuland and Koster 1991, Broekhuis 2004). Some of the examples discussed in the foregoing already refute the co-argument constraint (i.e. (2b), (7a), and (8b)), and even if such examples are set aside, both constraints depend on a parochial notion of co-argumenthood, presupposing as they do that in sentences like (9), which are usually assumed to be felicitous, *hij* and *zich* are not co-arguments:

(9) Hij vindt zich een goede padvinder.
     he considers REFL a good boyscout

Prima facie, data like the following would appear to corroborate the subject constraint:

(10) Zij$_1$ toonde hem$_2$ zich$_{*1,*2}$/zichzelf$_{1,2}$.
      she showed him REFL
      'She showed him to himself.'

The relevant reading is the one associated with index 2; call this reading (10$_2$). (10$_2$) seems to support the subject constraint, but on closer inspection the support is rather flimsy. Examples like (10$_2$) are exceedingly rare and barely felicitous even with *zichzelf*. In fact, (10$_2$) is such an unusual thing to say that I find it impossible to come up with a scenario that will decrease its Eyebrow Index to the level at which *zich* becomes acceptable. Moreover, the reflexive pronoun in (10) occurs in sentence-final position, which tends to be accented, and is therefore unsuitable for *zich* (cf. the contrast in (2)). All in all, there is precious little evidence for a *syntactic* asymmetry between *zich* and *zichzelf*.

   It seems likely that the strong reflexive *zichzelf* is the result of reanalysis of the string *zich zelf*, where *zelf* is an intensifying particle similar to German

selbst or French *même*. Sentence (11) illustrates the use of *zelf*:

(11) Betty waste Theo zelf.
     Betty washed Theo SELF

This sentence has at least two distinct interpretations, depending on whether *zelf* is construed adnominally or adverbially. In the former case the English translation would read, 'Betty washed Theo himself'; in the latter, 'Betty washed Theo herself'. In either case we perceive what Eckardt (2001) calls a 'centrality effect'. The adnominal reading of (11) suggests that among the people Betty might have washed, Theo was especially important, obstreperous, or otherwise distinguished, and the adverbial reading evokes similar suggestions regarding Betty.

Although the effect of *zelf* is like that of a focus particle in that it conjures up alternative denotations for the expression it associates with, it is unlike genuine focus particles in various respects, the most important of which is that it is *zelf* itself that attracts the focus, not the expression it associates with; indeed, *zelf* freely associates with expressions that cannot be stressed, like pronominal clitics, for example:

(12) ... dat-ie zelf de koningin een brief schreef.
     ... that-he SELF the queen a letter wrote

This is why *zelf* may associate with unstressable *zich*, while focus particles like *alleen* 'only' may not:

(13) a. Hij vindt zich ZELF een goede padvinder.
         he considers REFL SELF a good boyscout
      b. *Hij vindt alleen ZICH een goede padvinder.
         he considers only REFL a good boyscout

Eckardt (2001) gives an analysis of German *selbst* that I like very much, and as in all relevant respects *zelf* and *selbst* behave alike, I propose to adopt Eckardt's analysis for the Dutch particle, too. On this account, the meaning of the intensifying particle is trivial: it always denotes an identity function. This may seem a bit too austere at first, but I think it is exactly right. Consider the reading of (11) on which *zelf* is an adnominal modifier associated with Theo, and let 'id' be the identity function that maps each individual onto itself. Then (11) is interpreted as $W(b, id(t))$, which is of course equivalent to $W(b, t)$: the truth-conditional contribution of *zelf* is nil. But then how can the particle affect the interpretation of the sentence in which it occurs? Answer: by being in focus. *Zelf* must be focused, and since the particle denotes the identity function, the alternatives associated with (11) are propositions of the form $W(b, f(t))$, where f is some function from

individuals to individuals. In other words, in each of the relevant alternatives, Betty washes an individual that is the value of a function applied to *Theo*. (As always, it is assumed that the context will further restrict the set of alternatives.) This is how Eckardt accounts for the centrality effect caused by the intensifying particle.

On Eckardt's analysis, *zelf* is not a focus particle. Somewhat paradoxically, *zelf* raises the prominence of whatever it associates with by claiming the focus for itself, and it is forced to do so for its own sake too, because if the particle went unstressed, it would be redundant.

Our working hypothesis is that *zichzelf* issued from a reanalysis of the sequence *zich zelf*. In conjunction with Eckardt's treatment of *zelf* this leads us to expect that the peculiar focus behaviour of *zelf* will be lost when it combines with *zich*. This means, first, that there is no reason why *zelf* should continue to demand emphasis once it has become part of an expression with non-trivial content. This prediction is correct. In (14a), for example, *zelf* must be focused, but the reflexive pronoun in (14b) does not require primary stress.

(14) a. Betty waste zich zelf.
          Betty washed REFL SELF
      b. Betty waste zichzelf.
          Betty washed REFL

Secondly, *zichzelf* should not systematically give rise to the centrality effects that are characteristic of *zelf*. This prediction, too, is borne out by the data. Thus we account for the fact that *zichzelf* is more emphatic than *zich*, without therefore having to be contrastive or giving rise to centrality effects.

References

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