

## 5.

### **Julia Staffel – Humboldt Universität Berlin / Brown University** **Binding of reflexive pronouns in German**

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In this snippet, I intend to point out that the binding behavior of German reflexive pronouns shows some interesting peculiarities due to the fact that the German reflexive pronouns in 1st and 2nd person singular and plural are not distinct from the accusative personal pronouns, whereas there are separate forms for the 3rd person reflexive pronouns. As most research focuses on examples involving 3rd person reflexive pronouns, the irregularities I want to present here seem to have been neglected so far.

Consider the following sentence:

- (1) Karl hat sich gewaschen und Tobias auch.
- a. Karl hat sich gewaschen und Tobias hat sich gewaschen.  
(Karl washed himself and Tobias washed himself.)
  - b. Karl hat sich und Tobias gewaschen.  
(Karl washed himself and Tobias.)
  - c. # Karl hat sich gewaschen und Tobias hat Karl gewaschen.  
(Karl washed himself and Tobias washed Karl.)

As the reflexive pronoun *sich* is bound by *Karl*, there are two possible readings available for (1) which are expressed in (1a) and (1b), although (1a) seems to be the preferred reading. The interpretation expressed in (1c) is not possible.

However, the situation is different in the case of a 1st or 2nd person singular or plural reflexive pronoun, as in

- (2) Ich habe mich gewaschen und Tobias auch.
- a. # Ich habe mich gewaschen und Tobias hat sich gewaschen.  
(I washed myself and Tobias washed himself.)
  - b. Ich habe mich und Tobias gewaschen.  
(I washed myself and Tobias.)
  - c. Ich habe mich gewaschen und Tobias hat mich gewaschen.  
(I washed myself and Tobias washed me.)

In this case, the preferred reading is (2b), which corresponds to (1b). The

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important difference is that the strict reading (2c), which was unavailable in (1), is possible, and the sloppy reading (2a), which was possible in (1), is ruled out.

This difference is expected if the ellipsis is filled in by literally copying the form of the preceding clause. The strict reading in (1c) is impossible because, to refer to Karl being washed by Tobias, we would have to use the 3rd person singular accusative pronoun *ihn* rather than the 3rd person singular reflexive pronoun *sich*. The strict reading in (2c) is possible because *mich* is not only a reflexive pronoun, but also the accusative of the 1st person singular personal pronoun in German.

Interestingly, there is a way of making the excluded interpretations available without filling in everything that has been left out in the ellipsis. German allows only the missing pronoun to be added, as these examples demonstrate:

(3) Karl hat sich gewaschen und Tobias ihn auch.

(4) Ich habe mich gewaschen und Tobias sich auch.

It should be noted that the unavailability of the sloppy reading in (2a) is subject to dialectal variation: a quick survey among six native speakers of German showed that for some of them the reading (2a) is available, although they regarded it as “grammatically imprecise.” Most subjects pointed out that in order to express the meaning of the sloppy reading in (2a), they themselves would prefer the sentence in (4).

## References

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