Word order as a signal of meaning:
English reflexive pronouns and why we behave ourselves

Nancy Stern
The City College of New York

Abstract. This paper offers a semantic account of the occurrence of reflexive pronouns in contexts like *she behaved* / *she behaved herself* and *he dressed* / *he dressed himself*. Through an examination of attested data, I will show that the use of pronouns in these contexts leads to inferences of a HIGHER level of control by the subject in the activity named by the verb. This communicative effect can be explained by the meanings signaled by the English System of Degree of Control (Reid 2011), a semantic account of English word order. The Control analysis posits that the position of subjects and objects is a consistent signal of linguistically encoded meanings that are present in every instance of use, and it explains why speakers sometimes choose to use reflexive pronouns in examples like these.

1. Introduction. Linguists have observed that languages sometimes provide different formal structures for what appear to be essentially the same function. This paper seeks to understand the distribution of forms in one such instance by appealing to the notion that language is a symbolic system, consisting of signs with meanings, an idea traced to Saussure and found today among current schools such as cognitive grammar (Langacker 1988), the Columbia School (Diver 1969; Reid 2011; Huffman and Davis 2012), and others (Butler and Gonzálvez-García 2014). In particular, we examine pairs like those in (1), which seem to be referentially equivalent with or without the optional reflexive pronoun:

(1) a. She behaved / she behaved herself
b. He got sick / he got himself sick
c. He dressed / he dressed himself
d. He drove / he drove himself

All these verbs can occur intransitively or with a reflexive pronoun, with the same referential interpretation. Out of context, these sentences appear to be interchangeable. Labeling these uses as "optional reflexives" or as "middle voice" explains neither why they occur, nor what are the differences between them. This paper will demonstrate that when reflexive pronouns appear in these contexts, speakers are using the grammatical resources of English word order to guide hearers to their intended interpretations.

The overall communicative import of any utterance is far greater than its truth conditions. And in order to move beyond truth conditions, one has to move beyond isolated sentences, so I set out to collect actual instances of uses, such as (2):

(2) Sometimes I found myself angry that **the client had gotten himself sick** in the first place, a notion only one step away from the anger I was really feeling – anger at Joe for **getting sick** and for dying and of course for leaving me. (Senak)

This example shows the importance of context in understanding the distribution of forms. In the first instance (*the client had gotten himself sick*) it seems that the writer wants someone to blame, and it appears that the client was responsible for getting sick. Later in the passage though (*anger at Joe for getting sick*), the writer speaks calmly about his partner's death – and here he does not assign blame, and does not present getting sick as something that Joe is personally responsible for. That is, it is only when the reflexive pronoun appears that the writer seems to impute agency in the act of getting sick.

2. English System of Degree of Control. I will propose that the meanings of the English System of Degree of Control (Diver 1984; Reid 1991, 2010; Huffman 1993) account for the presence of reflexive pronouns in these types of examples. This grammatical system has been proposed within the theoretical framework of Columbia School linguistics (Huffman 2001), and it pertains to the ordered positions of words or phrases referring to participants in an event (or in traditional terms, arguments of a verb).

Columbia School, based on the work of William Diver and his students, proposes a radically functionalist approach to linguistic analysis. Language is seen essentially as a device of communication. Meanings are posited not only for lexical items, but also for all grammatical morphology, and for some features of word order as well. That is, when people speak, they choose not only lexical items based on their meanings, but also grammatical categories, such as singular and plural, to help communicate messages.

Columbia School analyses make a distinction between meaning and message: meanings are the semantic values that are linguistically encoded by lexical and grammatical signs, while messages are the interpreted results of communications. Analysts aim to account for the distribution of linguistic forms in terms of the contributions that the forms' meanings make to messages in actual communicative situations. As this framework is not based on truth conditions of sentences, it draws the line between linguistic meaning on the one hand, and pragmatics and what is sometimes called "social meaning" on the other, in a different way than generative and traditional linguistic theories.

The English System of Degree of Control (Control System, for short) refers to the ordered position of words or phrases referring to participants in an event. More specifically, the meanings in the Control system rank entities in terms of the semantic substance Control of the Event (where the event is expressed by the verb). These meanings are borne by signals, which are defined in terms of the position (relative to the verb) of one or more words for entities that

contribute to making the event happen.[1]

In verbs with both a subject and an object, there are two levels of control: HIGHER Control and LOWER Control. In such cases, the entity named before the event (Controller 1, or C1) is hypothesized to be a signal of HIGHER Control in the event, while the entity named after the event (C2) signals a LOWER Degree of Control in that event. This can be seen in the example, *The cat liked the dog*, and outlined in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Control meanings in *the cat liked the dog*

The cat liked the dog
C1 C2
HIGHER LOWER

Event = *liked*

Clearly, the cat exerts more control over the event of *liking* than does the dog, who presumably is more of a passive recipient of the cat's affection. Hearers must infer plausible roles for the participants in the named events, but in all cases, we find that the entity named before the verb (C1) has a relatively HIGHER degree of Control over the event than does the entity named after the verb (C2).

By hypothesis, Control meanings are signaled each time there is a verb with both a subject and an object. The Controller before the verb always has a HIGHER degree of Control in the event than the Controller after the verb:

(3) a. An avalanche destroyed the temple
b. A knife cut the cake
c. The key opened the door
d. The shoes dance her out into the street[2]

The examples in (3) show that we cannot predict the roles of subjects (HIGHER Controllers) and objects (LOWER Controllers). In (a), the avalanche was the agent that destroyed the temple. The knife in (b) had an active role – as the instrument – that cut the cake. And in (c), the key acted upon the door. The last example (d) is from a 1948 film based on "The Ballet of the Red Shoes," a fairy tale by Hans Christian Anderson. In this story, a young girl wants to attend a dance in a pair of red shoes. She gets the shoes and all goes well until she becomes tired and wants to go home. But the shoes are not tired and they do not want the night to end; as the movie database IMDb says, "They [the shoes] dance her not only out into the street, but also over mountains and valleys, through fields and forests." Clearly, the shoes have more Control in the dancing than does the girl, who is feet are dancing against her will.

[1] Defining these signals in terms of position rather than order is an innovation suggested by Joseph Davis (p.c.).
[2] Examples (c) and (d) are from Reid (1991: p. 175).

Unlike thematic roles, Control meanings rest on a crucial distinction noted above between meaning and message. The Control System hypothesis is that the meanings HIGHER Control and LOWER Control are linguistically encoded, and are signaled with every instance of a two-Controller event. By contrast, the roles of Agent, Patient, Instrument, Cause, etc., are not linguistically encoded; they are part of the message that ***results*** from the interpretations of utterances.

The Control System contributes the same same linguistic meanings each time it occurs. Another important point is that the Control meanings are relational. And because the Control System underdetermines the specific roles each participant will play, speakers can use it in creative ways (e.g., the *Red Shoes* example) - as long as the first participant has a HIGHER Degree of Control in the event than does the second participant.

In a moment we will see another example that illustrates the creative deployment of the meanings of the Control system, which involves the word *bunt*, which can be either transitive or intransitive:

(4) a. With a runner on third, the batter bunted.
b. The batter bunted the ball down the first base line.

In the next example, from a play-by-play commentary of a baseball game, a broadcaster is discussing the team manager's decision whether to have a player (Rubén Tejada) bunt or swing. He sees Tejada getting ready to bunt, and announces (5):

(5) Tejada is up. Is he going to bunt? In a similar situation in the 5th inning, he let him hit. But he's going to bunt him here. (Cohen)

This example demonstrates the speaker's creative deployment of the English System of Degree of Control. There are two participants in this act of bunting, the manager, and the player, Tejada. The manager is signaled as the HIGHER Controller because while Tejada will execute the bunt, it is the manager who has decided, and has directed him to do so.

These examples show the need for an imprecise meaning of Control. In the Columbia School approach, meanings are hypotheses, not observations. That is, the meanings of the Control System (HIGHER Control and LOWER Control) are posited to be the constant semantic contribution of a specific linguistic signal (word order); that is, they are posited to encompass the full range of the distribution of these signals, not their interpretation in a particular example.

3. One argument clauses. By hypothesis, there are no Control meanings signaled when there is no object. When there is just one argument, the subject can have virtually any role with respect to the event, as shown in the following examples from Reid (1991, p. 178):

(6) a. Sterling Moss drives well
b. The car drives well
c. The gasoline drives well
d. The road drives well

In (7), we see more one-argument examples. With no grammatical mechanism for signaling degree of Control in one-argument examples, we see that the range of control that a subject has in these events ranges quite widely:

(7) a. The child played.
b. The choir sang as a lone violin played.
c. The soup that eats like a meal
d. The book will publish in Italy by Rizzoli in early October. (Hachette)

4. Explaining *behave*-examples. We return now to the question we asked at the outset: why do reflexive pronouns occur in examples like (1), repeated here in (8):

(8) a. She behaved / she behaved herself
b. He got sick / he got himself sick
c. He dressed / he dressed himself
d. He drove / he drove himself

The answer lies in the meanings of the Control System. Without a pronoun, the two meanings of the Control system are not signaled. On the other hand, the presence of the reflexive pronoun invokes the Control System. When two arguments are mentioned (***she*** *behaved* ***herself***), a HIGHER level of Control is assigned to the first (the subject). The reason then that speakers include reflexive pronouns in these contexts is precisely to make clear that the subject is in control of the event named by the verb.

We can see this communicative strategy at work in the first attested example above (2), repeated here as (9):

(9) Sometimes I found myself angry that **the client had gotten himself sick** in the first place, a notion only one step away from the anger I was really feeling – anger at Joe for **getting sick** and for dying and of course for leaving me. (Senak)

It is the grammatical mechanisms of the English System of Degree of Control that create the message effects we saw earlier. With the reflexive pronoun, the Control System is invoked so that the writer imputes HIGHER Control to the client. Without the reflexive pronoun, and hence without the meaning HIGHER Control, the utterance would not present getting sick as something Joe had control over.

We turn now to other attested data. The next example is from a book for expectant parents:

(10) We are brought up to control and manage our bodies' functions, holding back coughs and yawns, fending off sleep in public…. But childbirth cannot be controlled in this sense. Once labor begins, **your baby is going to get himself born** with or without your conscious cooperation. (Leach)

The writer is explicitly trying to express the agency of the baby, and his control over the birth situation. The baby's birth will not be something that just happens; rather, the baby will be the active, controlling participant. It's not that *he will be born, or get born*; rather, *he will get **himself** born*. The meanings of the English System of Degree of Control (*your baby* is signaled as a HIGHER Controller) contribute to this message.

4.1 *Driving and dressing*. We turn now to examples of *driving* and *dressing*, which also raise the question: what is the reflexive pronoun doing with these verbs, since the sentences have the same referential interpretation with or without them (i.e, *she drove* / *she drove herself*). Once again, invented examples shed no light on the question. However, the next example, from an article in *The New York Times*, provides context that does help us understand the writer's choice to include the reflexive pronoun. It's about a man who lost the use of his legs when he was just 7 years old, in an accident with a drunk driver. The article describes the monumental battles this man has faced to live independently - to complete high school and college, and even finish law school, all while waging legal battles with New York State for funding along the way:

(11) At the end of the day, **Mr. McGuire drives himself home** in his specially equipped car, using hand controls instead of foot pedals, to his mother and step-father's ranch house in the Newburgh neighborhood where he grew up. (Glaberson)

The presence of the reflexive pronoun here, invoking the Control meanings, helps express the overall message of Mr. McGuire's own agency, his own role in controlling the driving, as he has controlled his life in general. The writer wants to emphasize the man's own level of control over this activity.

We see a similar reason for a reflexive pronoun in (12), about the NASCAR driver Jeff Gordon:

(12) Jeff Gordon was always out of the ordinary. As mothers helped their 8- and 9-year-old sons into their uniforms, gloves, and helmets and buckled them into their quarter midget racers, **young Jeff dressed himself**. (Fortune)

Here too, the reflexive pronoun triggers the Control System, whose meaning HIGHER Control underscores the greater control that young Jeff had in the event of dressing. The previous context tells us that most of the children were dressed by their mothers. But not in this case: it is the young Jeff Gordon who had control of this dressing.

4.2 *Inanimates*. In (13) we have a typical example of *behave* without a reflexive pronoun; the subject, an inanimate, (*the fire*) is not seen as having agency in what it does:

(13) In the months that followed, Scott would collect all the information he could about the fire as **it behaved** in his neighborhood -- and about how his city's firefighters and his neighbors behaved as the flames approached. (Del Vecchio)

Again, if we think about sentences out of context, we would wonder why we might ever see *behaved itself* with an inanimate subject, because we might not expect a speaker to want to attribute HIGHER Control or agency to an inanimate thing.

The next example shows the use of *behave itself* in which the inanimate subject (*it*) refers to a someone's hair. This appeared on Tumblr, in a post in which a teenage girl says "my hair has been really weird and wavy since I washed it yesterday, and I keep brushing it but then it just goes off and does what it wants." She included a photo with the following caption, about her hair:

(14) Thankfully **it behaved itself** for this picture

This example illustrates the use of the meaning HIGHER Degree of Control ascribed to an inanimate so as to communicate a message that the subject (*it* or *her hair*) has a will of its own.

4.3 *Behave herself* vs. *behave*. The final two examples show the verb *behave* both intransitively and with a reflexive pronoun. These examples appear in plot summaries from the IMDb movie database, and both pertain to films whose heroines' names are Scarlett. The first is about the 1939 movie *Gone With the Wind*, about the willful heroine Scarlett O'Hara:

(15) Scarlett is a woman who can deal with a nation at war, Atlanta burning, the Union Army carrying off everything from her beloved Tara, the carpetbaggers who arrive after the war. Scarlett is beautiful. She has vitality. But Ashley, the man she has wanted for so long, is going to marry his placid cousin, Melanie. Mammy warns **Scarlett to behave herself** at the party at Twelve Oaks (Gone)

Scarlett O'Hara is strong, brave, and intrepid. But when it comes to her behavior in the presence of the man she desires, she is advised to gather all the self-control she can muster: to behave herself. That is, her behavior should be as tightly constrained and controlled as her corsets!

By contrast, the next passage is from the plot summary of a less known movie, *One, Two, Three* (from 1961). The main character's name is also Scarlett:

(16) **Scarlett**, however, does not **behave** the way a young respectable girl of her age should: Instead of sightseeing, she goes out until the early morning and has lots of fun. (One)

This Scarlett is not constrained: no one is telling her what to do. She's out partying, relaxed, having fun. There is no need in this example to signal that she is maintaining or should maintain a HIGHER level of Control over her behavior.

5. Conclusion. In this paper, we have proposed an answer to the question we started with: what accounts for the presence of reflexive pronouns in contexts like the following:

(17) a. She behaved / she behaved herself
b. He got sick / he got himself sick
c. He dressed / he dressed himself
d. He drove / he drove himself

Through an examination of naturally occurring data, we have observed that the presence of the pronouns lead to an interpretation of the subject having a higher degree of control over an event. We have also seen that these communicative effects can be explained as the result of the meanings posited by the English System of Degree of Control (Diver 1984; Reid 1991, 2010). In this view, English word order is seen not as a manifestation of underlying syntactic structure, but rather, as a meaningful signal that is used by speakers to meet their communicative goals.

The Control analysis hypothesizes that word order is a consistent signal of the meanings HIGHER Control and LOWER Control (for, respectively, the noun phrase before and after the verb), and that these linguistically encoded meanings are present in every instance of use.

We have also seen the importance of naturally occurring data to understand the structure of language. And it appears that speakers and writers deploy the resources of their linguistic system for communicative purposes, a finding that is consistent with the theoretical position that grammar is fully meaningful.

References

Butler, Christopher & Francisco Gonzálvez-García. 2014. *Exploring functional-cognitive space*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins. http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/slcs.157

Davies, Mark. (2008-) *The Corpus of Contemporary American English: 520 million words, 1990-present*. Available online at http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/. (COCA)

Diver, William. 1969. The system of relevance of the Homeric verb. *Acta Linguistica Hafniensia* 12(1): 45-68. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03740463.1969.10415425.

Diver, William. 1984. *The grammar of English*. Unpublished ms.

Huffman, Alan. 1993. The Control-Focus interlock. Part I, Events and Participants. Modern English: A Columbia School Grammar. Unpublished ms.

Huffman, Alan. 2001. The linguistics of William Diver and the Columbia School. WORD 52(1): 29-68. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00437956.2001.11432507.

Huffman, Alan. 2009. The Control-Focus interlock. *Modern English: A Columbia School grammar,* Chapter I, pp. 1-32. Unpublished ms.

Huffman, Alan and Joseph Davis (eds.). 2012. *Language: Communication and human behavior: The linguistic essays of William Diver.* Leiden/Boston: Brill. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004208582.i-566

Langacker, Ronald. 1988. An overview of cognitive grammar. In Brygida Rudzka-Ostyn (ed.), *Topics in cognitive linguistics*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins.

Reid, Wallis. 2011. The communicative function of English verb number. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 29.1087-1146.

Data Sources

Cohen, Gary, Broadcaster, SNY-TV, 24 April 2013, 10:20 pm.

Del Vecchio, Rick. Bittersweet Legacy: East Bay hills fire a unifying force. San Francisco Chronicle, p. A1, 1996. In Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), Davies, 2008-.

Fortune. Speed Sells: led by superstar Jeff Gordon, Nascar is going national, *Fortune Magazine*, April 12, 1999.

Glaberson, William. A Disabled Man Fights For the Right to Strive. *The New York Times*, May 7, 1989.

Gone. *Gone with the Wind* Plot Summary, IMDb database (retrieved June 14, 2016)

Hachette. Hachette Books Press Release. Hachette Books and Rizolli to publish biography of former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. June 15, 2015

Leach, Penelope. 1987. *Your Baby and Child*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

One. *One, Two, Three* Plot Summary, IMDb database (retrieved June 14, 2016)

Senak, Mark. 1998. *A Fragile Circle*. Los Angeles: Alyson Books, p. 212-13.