

It's a small word

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1. Introduction*

The small word *zelf* has a double function: on the one hand, it occurs as the second part of the complex reflexive *zichzelf*, whereas on the other hand, it functions as a focus marker. Rooryck and Vanden Wyngaerd (1998) develop an analysis of the complex reflexive as involving the combination of a reflexive clitic *zich* and the focus marker *zelf*. However, the properties of *zelf* itself have not received much attention in the literature so far. In the present squib, we describe a number of correlations between the various syntactic positions of *zelf* and the semantic properties that correspond to these positions. We show that the scalar properties of *zelf* support Postma's (1997) claim that *zelf* diachronically involves the syntax of inalienable possession.

2. Syntactic properties of Focus-marker *zelf*

Zelf can occur in a variety of positions, such as sentence-initially as in (1a), with another constituent in a position preceding the finite verb as in (1b), or in the middle field as in (1c-d):

- (1)
- a. *Zelf* heeft Max de auto in de garage gezet.
'As for himself, Max put the car into the garage.'
 - b. Max *zelf* heeft de auto in de garage gezet.
 - c. Max heeft *zelf* de auto in de garage gezet.
 - d. Max heeft de auto *zelf* in de garage gezet.
'Max (himself) put the car (himself) into the garage (himself).'

Let us right at the outset set apart *zelf* as in (1a), which introduces a point of view from which the predication is to be considered. We shall not have much further to say about this 'point of view' *zelf*. We shall refer to the *zelf* as it used in (1b) by means of the term 'DP-contained *zelf*', as only a single constituent may precede the finite verb in Dutch main clauses; the occurrences of *zelf* in (1c-d) will be called VP-adjoined, for reasons to be discussed below. These four positions correlate with certain syntactic properties, and they are all interpretively different as well.

Let us start out with the syntactic properties. These set apart DP-contained *zelf* from all the other types of *zelf*. For one thing, DP-contained *zelf* is incompatible with indefinite DPs, as (2a) demonstrates. The other types of *zelf* are not so constrained.

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- (2)
- a. *Een student /*Niemand/*Vele mensen zelf leest/lezen *The Nation*.
'A student/Nobody/Many people her-/himself/themselves read(s) *The Nation*.'
 - b. Een student/Niemand/Vele mensen leest/lezen (zelf) *The Nation* (zelf).
 - c. Zelf zou niemand van onze studenten daartoe bereid zijn.

As Moravcsik (1972) notes, the focus marker *only* (and, we may add, its Dutch analogue *alleen*) displays the same restriction.

A property that is at first sight shared by all types of *zelf* is the fact that it is restricted to animate DPs, whence the contrast in (3).

- (3)
- a. (Zelf) (is) de directrice (zelf) (is) (zelf) gevallen.
'(As for herself) the director (herself) fell (herself).'
 - b. (*Zelf) (is) het kopje (*zelf) is (*zelf) gevallen.
'(As for itself) the cup (itself) fell (itself).'

Upon closer inspection, however, it appears that there is a contrast in this respect between DP-contained *zelf* and the other types of *zelf*. Given a suitable context, DP-contained *zelf* improves considerably with inanimate DPs, whereas the other types of *zelf* are not liable to such contextual improvement.

- (4)
- a. Het schoteltje is niet veel waard, maar het kopje zelf is authentiek 18e eeuws porselein.
 - b. *Het schoteltje is niet veel waard, maar (zelf) (is) het kopje (is) (zelf) authentiek 18e eeuws porselein.
'The saucer isn't worth much, but the cup itself is authentic 18th century china.'
- (5)
- a. Ik heb al de reviews doorgenomen, maar het boek zelf is nog niet verder geraakt dan mijn nachtkastje.
 - b. *Ik heb al de reviews doorgenomen, maar (zelf) (is) het boek (is) (zelf) nog niet verder geraakt dan mijn nachtkastje.
'I perused all the reviews, but the book itself hasn't made it beyond my nightstand.'

A further syntactic test makes a difference between on the one hand DP-contained *zelf* and sentence-initial *zelf*, and on the other hand VP-adjoined *zelf*. Only the latter turns out to allow modification by an element such as *helemaal* 'entirely' ((6b) is acceptable as a topicalised variant of VP-adjoined *zelf* (6c)):

- (6)
- a. *Helemaal zelf heeft Max de auto in de garage gezet.
'As for entirely himself, Max put the car into the garage.'
 - b. *Max helemaal zelf heeft de auto in de garage gezet.
 - c. Max heeft (helemaal zelf) de auto (helemaal zelf) in de garage gezet.
'Max put the car (entirely himself) into the garage (entirely himself).'

As an aside, we can observe that this appears to be the only modifier possible with *zelf*.

3. Semantic properties of *zelf*

Semantically, three sorts of *zelf* can be broadly distinguished. First, there is the 'point of view' interpretation already alluded to above (see (1a)). A second type of interpretation, found in (1c-d), is that of an adverbial adjunct, with a meaning roughly similar to 'on one's own', 'without the help of others':

- (7)
- a. Mijn dochter wil steeds *zelf* haar kleren aantrekken.
'My daughter always wants to put on her clothes herself.'
 - b. De directeur heeft me *zelf* naar de uitgang begeleid.
'The manager escorted me to the exit himself.'

The semantics of this type of *zelf* suggest that we are dealing with a VP-adjoined constituent, very close in meaning to an adjunct like *persoonlijk* 'personally'. We shall call the *zelf* which is replaceable by the adverb *persoonlijk* 'personally' a comitative *zelf*. That the role of this adjunct is that of a comitative is suggested by the fact that, when modifying an agentive VP, *zelf* is compatible with other Agent-oriented adverbs such as *opzettelijk* 'on purpose', as well as Instruments, but not with comitative adjuncts introduced by the preposition *met* 'with', as illustrated in (8).

- (8)
- a. Max heeft zijn broertje opzettelijk *zelf* een klap gegeven met een lange stok.
'Max hit his little brother himself on purpose with a long stick.'
 - b. *Max heeft zijn broertje *zelf* een klap gegeven met Sally.
'Max hit his little brother himself with Sally.'

Like the other adjuncts of this sort (such as *personally*, *intentionally*, *on purpose*, etc.) and like prepositional comitatives, comitative *zelf* is Agent-oriented. We take this to explain the animacy requirement on this type of *zelf*. Not all types of VP-adjoined *zelf* can be analysed as comitatives, however. This is because VP-adjoined *zelf* sometimes does occur with nonagentive subjects, as the following examples demonstrate.

- (9)
- a. Ik hou *zelf* teveel van mijn fiets om hem aan anderen uit te lenen.
'I like my bicycle too much myself to lend it to others.'
 - b. Walter noemde mij een vogelbrein, maar hij is *zelf* een volslagen idioot.
'Walter called me a birdbrain, but he's an utter idiot himself.'
 - c. Fred vindt Tim de slimste, maar hij is *zelf* ook uitermate intelligent.
'Fred finds Tim the smartest, but he's extremely intelligent himself as well.'

Strikingly, these occurrences of *zelf* are not replaceable by *persoonlijk* 'personally', which confirms the claim that they are not comitatives. The conditions under which *zelf* can be used with nonagentive predications are fairly specific. One type of environment is illustrated by (9a), and relies on the presence of the specific *teveel om* 'too much (in order) to' structural environment, as the contrast with (10a) shows.

- (10) a. ?*Ik hou zelf van mijn fiets.
 ‘I like my bicycle myself.’
 b. ?*Jan is zelf een volslagen idioot.
 ‘Jan is an utter idiot himself.’

The contexts in (9b-c) illustrate that a contrast of some sort is necessary to license *zelf* (cp. (10b)). Like the other cases of VP-adjoined *zelf*, it is restricted to animates, as shown by (4b) and (5b).

4. *Zelf* and the semantics of inalienable possession

We now turn to some general properties of the semantics of *zelf*. In a wide variety of cases, the interpretation of *zelf* involves some notion of scalarity (see also Edmondson & Planck 1978): in (1), for example, the implication is that Max’s putting the car in the garage was unexpected. Another way of formulating this is that Max is taken to occupy a position on a scale relative to other people who could reasonably be expected to put the car into the garage. His position on that scale is that of the most important person, which makes his engaging in such mundane activities as putting cars into garages unexpected. In this respect, *zelf*, as well as its English equivalent *himself*, differs minimally from another focus marker, *only*. The sentences of (11) presuppose a hierarchical ranking within a set of people with the headmaster higher on the scale than the assistant. *Only* in (11a) expresses the fact that the person who received you is lower on the scale than the one you expected, whereas, *himself* in (11b) has the opposite implication: the person receiving you is higher on the scale than the one you expected.

- (11) a. Did you see the headmaster? -- No, only the assistant received me.
 b. I went to school today and guess what: the headmaster himself received me.

A further parallel between *only* and *himself/zelf* was already noted in connection with (2) above, i.e. their inability to occur with indefinite DPs in a DP-contained position. The set of focus-markers including *only*, *himself/zelf* may be extended to include *even* (Dutch *zelfs*), which behaves analogously. Semantically, *zelf* corresponds to *even* in the sense that both Focus-markers refer to the highest point on the scale. Why should this be so, i.e. why is it that *zelf* picks out the highest ranked element on the scale? We suggest that the answer to this question can be found in the diachrony of *zelf*. Postma (1997) has argued that *zelf* is diachronically derived from the combination of a possessive morpheme *s-* and the inalienable noun *lf* ‘body’. The inalienable nature of body parts puts them very close to ‘essential’ or ‘most important’ parts (Pica 1988). We would like to propose that the restriction of Focus-marker *zelf* to the highest point on the scale results from a transfer to a scale of the notion of ‘essence’ that is inherent in the semantics of body parts. In other words, the notion of ‘(most) important part of an animate being’ evolves into the notion of ‘most important element on a scale’. This shift does not appear to be an unnatural one, although the exact mechanisms underlying a change in this direction need to be explored further. The diachrony explains why Focus-markers of the *zelf* type never refer to a lower point on the scale, similar to the Focus-marker *only*. As far as we can tell, there is no counterpart of *zelf/himself* that corresponds to *only*, i.e. a focus marker originating in a body part that would indicate that the DP is lower on the scale. The syntax of inalienable possession has become diachronically opaque in *zelf*, as is evident from the fact that it can also occur in the context of inanimate DPs, as in (4a) and

(5a), although a vestige of the body part semantics of *zelf* remains in its strong preference for modifying animate DPs.

Interestingly, the process that must be diachronically reconstructed for *zelf* is synchronically transparent in expressions such as *(hoogst)persoonlijk* ‘(highest) personally’, *in (hoogsteigen) persoon* ‘in (highest own) person’; different from *zelf, persoonlijk* ‘personally’ cannot occur with inanimate DPs. The fact that the superlative *hoogst(eigen)* ‘highest own’ need not be expressed shows that *persoonlijk* or *in persoon* determine the meaning of ‘highest point on the scale’ by themselves: the superlatives merely spell out this aspect of the meaning. The notion ‘highest point on the scale’ must be due to the inalienable nature of the noun *person*, which can refer to the body in various languages:

- (12) a. Max est intervenu en personne.
 ‘Max intervened in person.’
 b. Max est fier de sa personne.
 ‘Max is proud of his bodily appearance.’
- (13) a. John intervened personally.
 b. John is clean on his person.

This analysis also explains the often noted fact that reflexives are frequently diachronically derived from Focus-markers; the latter (in so far as they mark highest degree) are in turn often diachronically derived from a syntactic structure involving inalienable possession of (essential) body parts (Faltz 1977, Levinson 1991, Moravcsik 1972, Pica 1988, Postma 1997). Interestingly then, body parts can turn up in complex reflexives as diachronically reanalysed parts of Focus markers (*zich* + Focus-marker *zelf*), or directly, as the syntax of inalienable possession allows to construe reflexivity in a large number of languages.

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