

*HOW TO REFER TO YOURSELF WHEN TALKING TO YOURSELF\**

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**Abstract**

In talk addressed to yourself (for those who engage in such activity) either *I* or *you* can be used when referring to yourself (e.g. *What's wrong with me?* or *What's wrong with you?*). The use of *you* is constrained, though. It can't refer to the self in assertions about the self's state of mind, including thoughts, feelings, and intentions. In those cases *I* is the only option. This is because self-talk-*you* is 'mindless', thus sharing with ordinary dialogue-*you* the property of not being controlled by the mind of the speaker. In self-talk there is a speaker (*I*) and an addressee (*you*), who can even be represented in the same sentence (*I know you can do it!*), both pronouns denoting the self. This is possible, without violation of any principles of binding, because in normal self-talk there is ONLY ONE MIND, which can only be addressed as *I*.

**1. Introduction**

The following are some reflections on a phenomenon which, as far as I have been able to determine, has not previously been given any attention within linguistic theory, namely self-talk, also called intrapersonal communication or inner dialogue.<sup>1</sup> This is when you talk to yourself, audibly or inaudibly. Another term is 'private speech', which, however, is mainly applied to children's self-talk, with themselves or with imaginary interlocutors, which is typical of children between about two and seven (Vygotsky 1986, Berk 1994, Winsler & al. 2009). Self-talk, as investigated here, is not speaking to imaginary interlocutors, but speaking to yourself, the self being speaker as well as addressee. Children's private speech has been the subject of a fair amount of research by developmental psychologists. Self-talk among adults is a recognised phenomenon (see Brinthaupt & al. (2009) and references there), but appears not to have had the same amount of serious attention, certainly not by linguists. The more specific topic of this paper is how you refer to yourself, in self-talk. Given that you are speaker as well as addressee, do you refer to yourself as *I* or as *you*? As I will show, you can do either. Thus (1a) and (1b) are both acceptable in what I will call normal self-talk. You can, as it were, assume the role of speaker or addressee, in self-talk.

- (1) a. You're an idiot.  
b. I'm an idiot.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Inner dialogue' is a particularly misleading term, since, as will be discussed below, there is no dialogue: The communication is strictly one-way, from 'I' to 'you'.

There are cases, however, where you can't choose between *I* and *you*, in particular, there are constraints on the use of *you*, in self-talk. The purpose of the paper is to try to characterise and explain these constraints. The data in this paper are based on introspection (with examples translated from Swedish), but have been checked and compared with a number of other self-talking individuals, speakers of English as well as other languages. There seems to be some variation regarding certain acceptability judgments which cuts across language boundaries. This will be discussed in section 5.

As regards how common self-talk is, my findings so far indicate that most people (at least among academics) engage in self-talk, to varying degrees but enough to have intuitions about it, but there is a minority who don't, and who find it very odd that anyone would engage in such practice.

## 2. Self-talk data

Consider the following fairly typical examples of self-talk: <sup>2</sup>

- (2) a. You're hopeless.  
 b. What's wrong with you?  
 c. You can do it!  
 d. Pull yourself together.

For all of these except (d), an alternative is using *I* instead of *you*:

- (3) a. I'm hopeless.  
 b. What's wrong with me?  
 c. I can do it!  
 d. \*Pull myself/me together.

The reason why (3d) is not well-formed is, surely, that the imperative has an underlying subject 'you', as a grammatical, inherent property, which the reflexive must agree with, in  $\phi$ -feature values. The semantic value of the antecedent (the self) cannot override the grammatical agreement requirement (as familiar from other cases of pronominal form-reference mismatch; see Ross (1970: 250) and below).

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<sup>2</sup> When googling for 'self-talk' you mainly get hits with adverts for various therapies to help you replace negative self-talk with positive self-talk. Consider also the following quote from Brinthaupt & al. (2009):

Most research on inner and private speech in adulthood considers facilitative and debilitating self-talk in sports or exercise domains [...] or self-talk gone awry, focusing on negative self-statements from the perspective of clinical issues such as depression or anxiety.

As will be discussed below, the kind of self-talk discussed here is typically either reproach or encouragement of oneself. The former is supposed to be bad for you, causing stress and anxiety, while the latter is good, improving your self-esteem. My own self-talk is, I'm afraid, mostly negative, which is reflected in the examples in this paper.

Can you switch between *I* and *you*, though, in the same sentence? Cases such as (4) and (5) might seem to suggest that you cannot (the stars and question marks apply to the sentences when used as self-talk).

- (4) a. You can do it if you try.  
      b. I can do it if I try.  
      c. \*You can do it if I try.  
      d. \*I can do it if you try.
- (5) a. This is your chance to make them notice you.  
      b. This is my chance to make them notice me.  
      c. \*? This is your chance to make them notice me.  
      d. \*This is my chance to make them notice you.

This might seem to suggest that you make the choice between the role of speaker or addressee, between ‘I-mode’ and ‘you-mode’ only once per (independent) sentence. It may be noted that (4c, d) and to a lesser extent (5c, d) would be odd if they were addressed to a ‘real’ addressee, as well. This is an indication, to be confirmed below, that self-talk in the you-mode is subject to similar discourse conditions as real dialogue. When self-talking in the you-mode, you really *are* the addressee.

The following data show that you can very well use both pronouns, referring to yourself, in the same sentence.

- (6) a. I think I’ve had it.  
      b. I think you’ve had it.
- (7) a. I don’t know why every time I make the same stupid mistake.  
      b. I don’t know why every time you make the same stupid mistake.
- (8) a. I can’t believe my luck!  
      b. I can’t believe your luck!
- (9) a. I knew I could do it!  
      b. I knew you could do it!

In these cases, the matrix verb is a verb of cognition. Strikingly, in this case the matrix subject pronoun must be *I*, not *you*. The following sentences are unacceptable as self-talk.

- (10)a. \*You think you’ve had it.  
      b. \*You think I’ve had it.
- (11)a. \*You don’t know why every time you make the same stupid mistake.  
      b. \*You don’t know why every time I make the same stupid mistake.

(12)a. \*You can't believe your luck.

b. \*You can't believe my luck.

(13)a. \*You knew you could do it.

b. \*You knew I could do it!

Apparently, *you* can't refer to the self as holder of thoughts or beliefs, in self-talk.<sup>3</sup> Consider also the following examples:

(14)a. I can't take this anymore.

b. \*You can't take this anymore.

(15)a. You're driving me mad.

b. \*I'm driving you mad.

(16)a. I'll try once more, and that's it.

b. \*You'll try once more, and that's it.

Apparently, *you* can't refer to the self as an experiencer of feelings or holder of intentions or plans, either. Generalising, *you* can't refer to the self in assertions about the self's state of mind, including thoughts, feelings, and intentions; only *I* can.

### 3. The thinking self and the mindless self

One way to understand the generalisation above is that there are two aspects of the self involved: One is 'controlled by the mind', with thoughts and feelings, and engaging in activities that are wholly transparent and predictable. We might even want to say that it *is* the mind. The other is not under direct control by the mind; it doesn't think, but does act, engaging in activities which are not wholly transparent or predictable, and it is typically in need of either reproach or encouragement. The 'mindless self' can be referred to by either *you* or *I* (see (3b) for an example of the latter). The thinking and feeling self (the mind) can only be referred to by *I*. A striking property of the referent of *you* in (normal) self-talk is that he never answers back, however much he is insulted. This is, I propose, because he can't think; he is a mindless self. The property shared by the referent of *you* in self-talk and the referent

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<sup>3</sup> This claim is too strong in view of examples such as the following, judged to be acceptable as self-talk by several informants.

(i) You think you're so clever!

The crucial difference between (i) and (10)-(13) may be that the thinking is part of the focus in (i), being the object of critique. The sentence does not sound natural as self-talk for me, though. This may be a case where there is real inter-speaker variation. Noel Burton-Roberts has supplied the following as a piece of self-talk, where it seems to be crucial that the matrix cognition verb is past tense:

(ii) You didn't think you could do it, did you?

Again, for me this sentence is unnatural as self talk. I will leave these differences aside, but see section 5 for some observations on variation in self-talk.

of *you* in dialogue is that they are not controlled by the mind of the speaker: Dialogue-*you* because it has a different mind, self-talk-*you* because it doesn't have a mind.

A straightforward (and probably simplistic) way to represent this situation formally is to include it as part of the lexical specification of the pronominal forms. The pronoun *I* would have, as part of its lexical specification, a feature [+S(elf's) M(ind)] while *you* and other pronouns have [-SM]. The semantic import of [+SM] is that the pronoun can denote the self's mind (as well as other aspects of the self). The feature [-SM] is not incompatible with reference to the self as long as it is the mindless aspect of the self; this is what we see in the well-formed examples of self-talk with *you* referring to the self. But if the pronoun is an argument of what might be called a mind-predicate, that is a predicate about the state of mind (cognition, feelings, intentions) of a person, then *I* is the only option for reference to the self, since only *I* can refer to the self's mind.<sup>4</sup> This is why (10-13) and (14a), (15b) and (16a) are ungrammatical as self-talk.

#### 4. Self-talk and the Performative Hypothesis

A partly different account of the generalisation that *you* in self-talk can't refer to a thinking or feeling self, which does not depend on a feature [-SM], is that when addressing yourself as *you*, there is still an *I* linguistically represented in the sentence, covertly if not overtly. This means adopting some version of the classical (and much reviled) performative hypothesis (PH) of Ross (1970).<sup>5</sup> According to the PH, all declarative sentences are embedded under a covert 'performative' clause [*I SAY to you* \_\_\_\_], where SAY is an underspecified verb of communication. Ross gave a number of arguments in favour of each of the three components (*I*, *you*, and SAY) of the underlying performative clause of declaratives. He gave as many as 10 arguments for a higher subject *I*. Several of them are based on the possibility of an anaphor referring to the speaker in main clauses without an overt first person antecedent. (17a, b) are two such cases.

- (17)a. Physicists like myself/\*himself don't often make mistakes  
 b. A friend is going to drop by.

'Friend' in (17b) can only be interpreted as 'friend of mine', where 'of mine' is arguably syntactically represented as a DP-internal PRO. (17a, b) contrast with (18a, b), showing that third person anaphors are possible in the same context when embedded under a clause like [*John said* \_\_\_\_], suggesting that (17a, b) are embedded under a (covert) clause with a first person subject.

<sup>4</sup> This is not a matter of mind vs. body. *You're an idiot* as self-talk does not mean 'My body is an idiot'. The mind-body distinction is, apparently, not deeply rooted in our cognition, but something like 'controlled by the mind' is.

<sup>5</sup> See also Sadock (1974). PH-bashing was quite in vogue in the seventies; see Gazdar (1979: 15-35) and references there. Much of the critique is of the unconstructive, nit-picking kind that was typical of the debate within generative linguistics in the seventies, but it did have the effect that the PH was silenced, until now, more than 30 years later, when the idea of a higher 'I' in clausal syntax is being seriously explored again (see the text below).

- (18)a. John said that physicists like himself don't often make mistakes.  
 b. Mary says that a friend is going to drop by. (→ a friend of hers)

The arguments for a higher predicate SAY, and for a higher argument *you* are fewer in number, and rather less compelling than the arguments for a higher *I*. However, to explain the constraints on the form of address in self-talk, the most crucial part of the hypothesis is the higher abstract pronoun *I*.

There are some recent 'neo-performative' theories, which articulate the idea that all finite, independent clauses (and perhaps some dependent clauses) are in the scope of a feature or operator 'I', represented in the C-domain of the sentence and defining the 'speaker coordinates' of the sentence ('I, here, now'), against which the temporal and spatial relations in the sentence and the person of the arguments are computed: Schlenker (2003), Sigurðsson (2004, 2007), Giorgi (2009). An early forerunner, not listed among the references in any of these works, or in Ross (1970), is Buehler (1934).

I propose that the representation of the speaker, the 'I' in the deictic domain, presumably the highest subdomain of the C-domain of finite clauses, interfacing with the context, is a linguistic feature or feature bundle which denotes the consciousness or *mind of the speaker*; I will call this the deictic feature [my mind] (in Ross's (1970) PH the mind of the speaker is not encoded directly in the performative clause, but is presupposed by the underlying performative predicate SAY; to initiate a communicative act you must be a 'thinking self'). I also assume the traditional index: a DP has an index as part of its feature make-up which encodes its 'identity', meaning that every other DP with the same index denotes the same individual. Sharing an index also means that the person features must be identical. This is why *my* is ill-formed in (19) (based on Ross (1970)), when uttered by the king, referring to himself in the third person (the possibility of this type of self-reference has interesting implications for the theory sketched here, which I will, however, ignore).

- (19) The king<sub>i</sub> will announce his<sub>i</sub>/\*my<sub>i</sub> decision as soon as possible.

The deictic feature [my mind] comes with an index, and every instance of *I/me/my* in the sentence in the scope of [my mind] then has the same index. There is some debate in the literature whether *I* is a constant, necessarily referring to the speaker, or whether, like third person pronouns, it is a variable. Schlenker (2003) and Sigurðsson (2004, 2007) argue that it is a variable, based on the observation that in some languages the pronoun corresponding to *I* can be used as a logophoric pronoun, and thus can refer to someone other than the speaker in certain embedded sentences. See Safir (2005) for discussion. I am not taking a stand on this issue here.

The definition of the deictic speaker-feature as [my mind] becomes crucial when the pronoun *you* is used to refer to the self. *I* cannot have the same index as *you*, by the laws of Universal Grammar, because they have different person features. But in self-talk *I* and *you* can denote the same person, the speaker/the self, even in the same sentence, as in (9b) and (15a), for example. This paradox is resolved by interpreting *you* as mindless: thereby it is denotationally sufficiently distinct from *I*, the mind of the self. They have distinct indices, as required by the grammar, and thereby denote distinct entities, namely two different aspects of

the self. This is the only way you can be both a speaker and an addressee of the same utterance.

It now follows that if *you* is the subject of a mind-predicate, as in (10-13), or an indirect object of a mind-predicate as in (15d), it can't be interpreted as referring to the self, but only as referring to some other person, who has a mind.<sup>6</sup>

The PH and related theories are seen in a new perspective in Timothy J. Crow's theory of schizophrenia (Crow 1998, 2004). According to Crow, schizophrenia is a form a deep linguistic disorder, where, to put it in non-specialist terms, the wiring which links the departments in the brain which process speech (output and input) with the departments which generate and process thought goes wrong.

The first-rank symptoms of schizophrenia are dysfunctions of just such a system [the system relating speech and thought: AH]. Neural activity that is internally generated (thought) is perceived as having the character of a message (speech) from an independent source, and thought itself (along with volition) is perceived as controlled from outside the individual. The distinction between what is generated by the self and what comes from the outside world, is lost. (Crow 1998: 306).

In other words, schizophrenic subjects hear voices which in reality are their own thoughts, and have the sensation of having their mind controlled by somebody else. Crow relates this to the theory of indexicality in Buehler (1934), and notes the possible relevance of Ross's performative hypothesis, in this connection: schizophrenia can be described as a malfunctioning of the performative clause identifying the speaker's speech acts, or, in the present terms, of the deictic [my mind], which identifies the speaker's speech acts and, I assume, also his thoughts as generated by the self.

As a speculative remark: self-talk is popularly associated with madness or dementia. I have proposed here that a characteristic of normal self-talk is a distinction between a thinking self (always addressed *I*) and a mindless self (which can be addressed *you*). This suggests that a characteristic of abnormal self-talk is that this distinction is not upheld, such that the self denoted by *you* in self-talk is taken to have a mind, in which case it may, for example, answer back when being reproached. This would then be another, perhaps less pernicious, effect of a malfunctioning of the system relating speech and thought.

## 5. On variation in self-talk

There seems to be some genuine variation with regard to sentences like (20), as self-talk:<sup>7</sup>

(20) If I were you, I'd keep my mouth shut from now on.

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<sup>6</sup> It is not the case that any instance of *I* must denote the self's mind, as it can denote, for example, a representation of the self in a photo, as in *Look, I've got hair down to my shoulders*, uttered by me when looking at a photo taken of me years ago (see Jackendoff (1992) for discussion of this form of reference). This is an indication that the theory sketched here needs some refinement.

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Noel Burton-Roberts for discussion of this type of locution.

For some speakers (including me) (20) is completely impossible as self-talk, while other self-talking speakers find it quite natural.

Sentences like (20) were first discussed in the context of linguistic theory by Lakoff (1970), who discussed the sentence (21), attributed to James McCawley:

(21) I dreamt I was Brigitte Bardot, and I kissed me, and then I woke up.

They are interpreted by transfer of reference of *I* from the speaker to another person: The speaker's mind hypothetically occupies the mind (in (21) also the body) of the other person, thereby taking his/her viewpoint on the event described. In Safir's (2005) words the consciousness of the speaker inhabits the viewpoint of another person (see Safir 2004: 89ff., 2005).

For speakers who don't accept (20) as self-talk, there is a straightforward explanation of this in terms of the theory outlined in section 4: Self-talk-*you* doesn't have a mind which the reference of *I* could transfer to. But that means that the self-talk-*you* of speakers who accept (20) as self-talk has somewhat different properties: It seems to be ascribed a mind to the extent that it can have a viewpoint, although presumably not to the extent that it would have intentions or feelings of its own.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A few speakers have reported that they can use *we* to refer to the two aspects of themselves (*We did it!*), which other speakers find odd.



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