

# Modifiable and intensifier *self* in Dutch and Sign Language of the Netherlands\*

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper we discuss the properties of adverbial exclusive *self* and we argue that it is not a uniform category. We propose a division into two categories and support this division with data from Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT — Nederlandse Gebarentaal). In Germanic languages like German, Dutch and English, *self*<sup>1</sup> can be used to highlight the referent it associates with, and to contrast it with an alternative referent or a group of alternative referents. This is illustrated in the Dutch example of adverbial exclusive *self* in (1).

- (1) Hij wast de kleren zelf (niemand anders doet het voor hem).  
he washes the clothes self (nobody else does it for him)  
'He washes the clothes by himself (nobody else does it for him).'

In example (1), a contrast between *self* and others is implied. Siemund (2000) calls this contrastive use of *self* an intensifier. This terminology goes back to Moravcsik (1972). According to Siemund, an intensifier makes a contrast between the referent that is associated with *self*, and other, alternative referents. In a comparative study on English and German intensifier *self*, Siemund describes the relation between the referent associated with *self* and the other contrasted referent(s) as a centre/periphery relation.<sup>2</sup> Intensifier *self* thus structures a set of referents into a centre and a periphery.

In Section 2, we introduce some of the recent literature on the semantic analyses of intensifier adverbial *self* in German and English (Eckardt 2001, Gast 2002, Siemund 2000, Hole 2002, 2004). These analyses all assume alternative sets. In particular, we focus on two examples that are problematic for the analysis of Eckardt.

In Section 3, we show that some, but not all instances of adverbial *self* can be modified in Dutch. We argue that modified *self* measures out the involvement

of the agent in the action described by the predicate. If *self* is modified, an intensifier interpretation is not present. We argue that this is due to the lack of a maximal interpretation that is required for the intensifier reading. We will elaborate on the notion of intensifier, in order to explicate the contrast we find in the interpretation of modified *self*. We show that the problematic examples in Eckardt's analysis are exactly those cases that can be modified in Dutch. We introduce data from NGT that is supportive of the division we propose in intensifier and modified *self*. Also, when *self* is modified, NGT appears to explicitly display the measuring out of the event represented by the predicate. In Section 4, we demonstrate that modified *self* imposes restrictions on the predicate type it accompanies.

## 2. Some semantic analyses of adverbial *self*

Within the class of adverbial intensifiers, Siemund (2000) distinguishes exclusive intensifiers from inclusive intensifiers. When *self* is used as an adverbial-inclusive intensifier, the referent modified by *self* is a central representative. In this context, *self* has an inclusive meaning and can often be replaced by *also* or *too*.

- (2) If he's busy breaking the rules himself, he could hardly demand that they do otherwise.

In (2), the center/periphery relation is illustrated by the fact that the person who asks the others to respect the rules is a central representative of the rules (König & Gast 2004).

In the adverbial-exclusive use, *self* can often be paraphrased by *in person*.

- (3) Mrs. Dalloway wanted to buy the flowers herself.

Here the contrast is made between Mrs. Dalloway buying the flowers herself and asking someone else to do it (König & Gast 2004). "Delegating a task" is only possible for someone who has a central role, a role of responsibility, possession, etc. In this context Siemund (2000) also mentions the roles of beneficiary and maleficiary. Kemmer (1995) and Hole (2002, 2004) classify this *self* as agentive *self*.

Eckardt (2001), Hole (2002, 2004) and Gast (2002) describe the semantics of intensifier *self* in terms of identity functions, i.e. functions mapping each element of a given set onto itself. They interpret the stress on *self* according

to existing theories of focus in terms of alternatives for the identity function (Rooth 1992). According to Eckardt (2001), intensifiers evoke functions that map an individual onto “who might have been involved instead”, as she explains by means of this German example.

- (4) Der König öffnete selbst die Tür.  
       the king opened self the door  
       ‘The king opened the door himself.’

In this example, the king is the centre, and the periphery consists of the set {the butler-of-the-king, the prime minister, the child-of-the-king...}. The relation between centre and periphery is maximal (not gradient) in the sense that an element cannot ‘almost belong’ to the centre; it is in the centre or it is not. The set of alternatives constituting the periphery is only “loosely” specified by the context.

In this paper, we focus on the adverbial-exclusive *self* and we argue that it is not a uniform class: some instances of exclusive *self* cannot be interpreted as intensifiers, i.e. they cannot be analyzed in terms of a contrast between a center and a periphery (Siemund 2000) or in terms of contrast between the referent associated with *self* and some alternative referent (Eckardt 2001).

Eckardt signals two problems with her analysis of *self* as an intensifier. For these examples that are illustrated in (5) and (6), we show that for one of the readings, alternative referents are not relevant.

- (5) Emil backt den Kuchen selbst.  
       Emil bakes the cake self  
       ‘Emil bakes the cake himself.’

This example has several readings. The intensifier reading arises if we suppose that Emil is a baker and he has to make a wedding cake. Instead of asking one of his assistants (one out of the periphery) to bake the cake, he prefers to make the cake himself. This is the intensifier reading. Another, problematic reading arises if Emil has no special involvement in the action expressed by the predicate, for instance if Emil is not a baker and baked the cake instead of buying one. This reading is not necessarily analyzed in terms of alternative referents that can bake the cake instead of Emil. As the contrast cannot be made in terms of a center/periphery relation, we have to conclude that in this case *self* cannot be an intensifier in terms of Eckardt’s definition. Eckardt calls this reading the do-it-yourself reading.

Another problem that Eckardt mentions for her analysis of *self* as an intensifier is example (6).

- (6) Adrian fand den Weg zum Bahnhof selbst.  
Adrian found the way to the station self  
'Adrian found the way to the railway station himself/by himself.'

According to Eckardt, *self* in (6) has a non-assistive reading, meaning that Adrian found his way to the station without any help. Again, a set of alternative referents is not relevant, in the sense that (6) does not contrast with 'someone else found the way to the station.' Rather what seems to be important is whether Adrian performed the whole action of finding the way on his own.

Eckardt mentions that the problematic cases for her theory can eventually be analyzed in terms of alternative predicates, as is clear in the case of (5). Emil baked the cake himself, instead of, for instance, buying one. In the literature, intensifier adverbial *self* has been analyzed in terms of alternative predicates by Gast (2002). He proposes some constraints on the contrastive relation of the alternative predicates to the original one. For instance, all predicates contrasting with a predicate with an adverbial exclusive *self* must contain that predicate, like the predicate in (7b) contains the one of (7a).

- (7) a. The king [opens the door] himself.  
b. The king asks one of his assistants to [open the door].

However, there is no containment relation feasible for Eckardt's problematic case in (5), or for any other case of non-intensifier *self*. The potential alternative predicate 'buying a cake' cannot be analyzed as an expansion of the predicate 'baking the cake oneself'.

An analysis in terms of alternative thematic roles (Hole 2002) is close to the analysis of Gast. As is clear from the examples in (7), the king's agentive role involves different predicates ('to open' and 'to ask'). According to Hole (2002), *selbst* suggests several alternative roles. For instance, the mother of Emil can be the agent of the event, while Emil is the beneficiary. In principle there is no limit to the number of the alternative involvements of the asserted agent into the eventuality of the alternative sentences. Some alternatives cannot be captured in terms of alternative thematic roles of the same predicate but involve different predicates like for instance buying a cake from a baker's shop. Although this seems to be a theoretical drawback of the alternative thematic role analysis, sentences like the one in (6) are even more problematic because no alternatives seem to be present at all.

Neither the analysis of Hole in terms of alternative semantic roles, nor Gast's analysis in terms of alternative predicates can account for the non-intensifier readings of Eckardt's do-it-yourself and non-assistive sentences in (5)

and (6) respectively. In our analysis of non-intensifier *self*, we do not assume alternative semantic roles or predicates.

In the next paragraph, we will show that, at least in Dutch, what seems to be relevant for the interpretation of (5) and (6) is the possibility to modify *self* and thereby to imply the scalarity of the involvement of the actor in the action expressed by the predicate.

### 3. Modifiable *self*

In Dutch, *self* can be modified by for instance *bijna*/ALMOST, *bijna helemaal*/ALMOST COMPLETELY, *helemaal*/COMPLETELY, as is shown in (9).<sup>3</sup>

- (8) Emil bakt de taart (bijna helemaal) zelf.  
 Emil bakes the cake (almost completely) self  
 'Emil bakes the cake (practically) by himself.'

If *self* is modified, the degree of involvement of the subject in the action plays a role. In (8), the modification 'bijna helemaal' means that the action of baking the cake is not all done by Emil, and it can be inferred that Emil received some help. Even without explicit modification, as in (9), the implicit possibility of assistance remains. We call this case 'modifiable' *self*. Sentence (9) thus has two interpretations; either he baked the cake and nobody else did it for him, or he baked the cake without help.

- (9) Emil bakt de taart zelf.  
 Emil bakes the cake self  
 'Emil bakes the cake by himself'

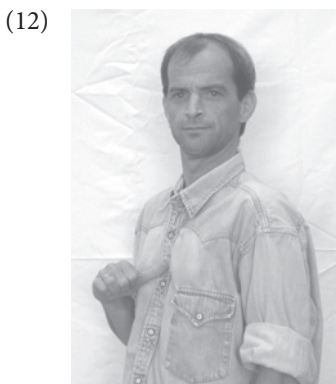
In the first case, the action is seen as a whole. In the latter case, a scale of actor involvement (and of possible assistance) is relevant. The instances of *self* that are modifiable in Dutch appear to coincide with the types of *self* that are problematic for the analyses of Eckardt, Gast and Hole. Both the do-it-yourself and the non-assistive readings in terms of Eckardt are modifiable in Dutch.

We illustrate the contrast between intensifier and modified *self* in a context of building a house.

- (10) Jan heeft zijn huis zelf gebouwd, in plaats van het door een  
 Jan has his house self build instead of it by a  
 aannemer te laten doen.  
 contractor to let do  
 'John built his house himself, instead of having a contractor do it.'
- (11) Jan heeft zijn huis bijna helemaal zelf gebouwd. Zijn broer heeft  
 Jan has his house almost completely self build his brother has  
 hem met het dak geholpen.  
 him with the roof helped  
 'John built his house practically by himself. His brother helped him with  
 the roof.'

The reading in (10) can be captured by existing analyses in terms of alternatives (Gast 2002). In the modified reading in (11), the action as described by the predicate is split into a part that involves Jan's work and a part that is done by his brother.

In NGT, intensifier and modifiable readings cannot be confused because only in the intensifier reading the sign *ZELF* appears. In (12) we illustrate the sign *ZELF*.<sup>4</sup> It is often accompanied by the mouthing of the Dutch word 'zelf'.<sup>5</sup>



The distribution and function of this sign is somewhat different from the use of *self* in Dutch. In NGT-translations by two native signers of Dutch sentences with adverbial exclusive *self*, the sign *ZELF* shows a distribution that seems to follow the subdivision of adverbial exclusive *self* into a modifiable and an intensifier reading.<sup>6</sup> The sign *ZELF* appears to occur only in the readings that we have classified as real intensifiers that have a contrast-with-some-alternative interpretation. The sign *ZELF* cannot be modified in NGT. The NGT-sentence

in (13a) is a translation of the Dutch sentence with the non-modified intensifier interpretation of *self* in (13b).

- (13) a. PAINTING PAINT JAN<sup>INDEX<sub>left</sub></sup>, ZELF<sup>INDEX<sub>left</sub></sup><sup>7</sup>  
 b. Jan heeft het schilderij zelf geschilderd.  
 John has the painting self painted  
 'John painted the painting himself.'

Not only is the distribution of the sign ZELF restricted to the maximal contrastive use, the NGT translation of the modified version of the sentence in (14b) can only be realized by making explicit that the action is divided up in a part that is done by the subject, and another part that is done by or with the help of someone else.

- (14) a. JAN PAINTING PAINT, NEXT, <sub>right</sub>HELP<sub>firstperson</sub><sup>8</sup>  
 b. Jan heeft het schilderij bijna helemaal zelf geschilderd.  
 John has the painting almost completely self painted  
 'John painted the painting practically by himself.'

As we propose to analyze the modified reading in terms of a (temporal) division of actions, the notion of 'measuring out' as proposed by Tenny (1994) may be relevant. She associates the splitting up and measuring out of the action with the state of the object. For example, in the process of building a house, the fulfillment of the action can be measured by the stage of attainment of the house. However, in the case of modified *self*, the splitting up of the predicate is not necessarily linked to the stage of attainment of the object, as the example in (15) shows.

- (15) Hij zingt de solo (bijna helemaal) zelf.  
 he sings the solo (almost completely) self  
 'He sings the solo (practically) by himself.'

Sentence (15) can describe a situation where someone sings large parts of the solo. In the end the song is not necessarily completely performed.<sup>9</sup> Rather than the state of accomplishment of the object, the degree of involvement of the subject in the action imposes the splitting up of the action described by the predicate. An analysis in terms of a scale of subject involvement can also account for the assistive readings of modified *self*. A maximal degree of subject involvement is implied in (16). In this case, the subject opened the door without any help. In (17), the subject got some help by the execution of the action.

- (16) Hij heeft de deur helemaal zelf geopend.  
he has the door completely self opened  
'He opened the door all by himself'
- (17) Hij heeft de deur bijna helemaal zelf geopend.  
he has the door almost completely self opened  
'He opened the door practically by himself.'

In NGT, these modified *self* readings never involve the use of the sign ZELF. In case the modifier 'helemaal' (completely) is used in a Dutch target sentence like (16), a construction with the sign ALL can be used. The sign ALL associates to the predicate and the interpretation of subject involvement into the predicate (the painting action) is maximal.

- (18) a. JAN PAINTING PAINT ALL  
b. Jan heeft het schilderij helemaal zelf geschilderd.  
John has the painting completely self painted  
'John painted the painting all by himself.'

If the subject involvement in Dutch is maximal, the sentence is ambiguous between an intensifier reading where the subject of the sentence is contrasted with other possible agents (19a) and a modifiable reading meaning 'without any help. In the latter case modifiable *zelf* has a zero modifier. The subject involvement in the action is maximal.

- (19) a. Hij heeft de deur zelf opengemaakt (en niemand anders).  
he has the door self opened (and nobody else)  
'He opened the door (and nobody else did).'
- b. Hij heeft de deur zelf opengemaakt (zonder hulp).  
he has the door self opened (without help)  
'He opened the door (without help).'

Modification with *bijna helemaal*/PRACTICALLY appears to exclude an intensifier reading. In example (20) we show that it is not compatible with the contrastive-exclusive complement 'and nobody else does'.<sup>10</sup>

- (20) Hij opent de deur bijna helemaal zelf en niemand anders  
he opens the door almost completely self and nobody else  
opent de deur.  
opens the door  
'He opens the door practically by himself and nobody else does.'



In the next section, we discuss some further consequences that modified *self* has for the interpretation of the predicate.

#### 4. Consequences for the interpretation of the predicate imposed by modified *self*

We have shown in Section 3, that, in Dutch, some instances of exclusive *self* can be modified, whereas others cannot.<sup>11</sup> We argued that modified *self* can only be used if the predicate can be split up into a part done by the subject and another part that is not done by the subject. As a consequence, modified *self* may not be able to freely combine with all types of predicates. In Vendler's (1967) classification, both accomplishments and activities are durative, consisting of successive phases following one another in time. As a result, these classes are feasible candidates for a predicate being split into a phase done by or attributed to the subject and a phase that is not but which is nevertheless imposed by modified *self*. Actually, most of the cited examples with modified *self* are *accomplishments*: eg. 'bake a cake', 'clean a room', 'build a house', and 'paint a painting'. Also the *activity* 'sing a solo' is durative. However, in some verbs the sub-actions of the predicate are not necessarily consecutive, but can occur simultaneously. For example, in the *activity* verb 'zorgen voor' (to take care of) the assistance one can have in for instance taking care of children can be either consecutive or can take place simultaneously.

Since modified *self* can be an expression of simultaneous help, its occurrence probably does not depend on the consecutive aspect of the predicate. Also, predicates that do not consist of consecutive phases but rather indicate an 'action state' can be modified by 'bijna helemaal'/PRACTICALLY.

- (21) De patiënt ademt bijna helemaal zelf.  
       the patient breathes almost completely self  
       'The patient breathes practically by himself.'

The relevant property of the predicate may not be consecutive phases or accomplishment but rather the possibility to distinguish sub-events or sub-actions.

We may even argue that modified *self* changes the interpretation of the predicate. The achievement predicate 'to enter the house' typically has a punctual, non-durational interpretation.

- (22) a. Jan komt zelf het huis binnen.  
John comes self the house in  
'John enters the house himself/by himself.'  
b. Jan komt bijna helemaal zelf het huis binnen.  
John comes almost completely self the house in  
'John enters the house practically by himself.'

In the intensifier reading of *self* in (22a), the interpretation of 'to enter' is that of an instantaneous event. When modified, the interpretation of 'to enter' gets a durational aspect in that it is understood as a process of entering the house. Again, the durational interpretation imposed by the modifier in (21b) can be understood in terms of a scale of actor involvement. When the degree is not maximal, as in the case of modification of *self*, a durative interpretation arises.

## 5. Concluding remarks

We provide evidence that a class of intensifiers, namely adverbial exclusive intensifiers that are treated in the literature as one class, should not be analyzed as one class. We propose one subclass that contains modifiable *self* that, when it is modified, divides the involvement of the agent into the event in a part where the subject is involved and a part without subject involvement. Modified *self* thus scales the action as done by the agent with that not done by the agent. The second subclass is formed by the real intensifier cases where the subject is contrasted with a referent from its periphery. This use of *self* cannot be modified. The proposed division is further corroborated by the fact that the two subclasses are expressed differently in NGT. The use of the sign ZELF appears to be restricted to non-modified forms of exclusive adverbial *self*. NGT translations of predicates that are measured out by modified *self* in Dutch, are overtly and explicitly divided in a part that is done by the subject and a part that is done by, or with the help of someone else.

## Notes

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1. In this paper we use *self* to refer to the cognates *selbst* (German), *zelf* (Dutch) and *himself* (English).
2. Although Siemund discusses both adnominal and adverbial *self*, we will restrict ourselves to adverbial *self*.
3. When *self* is modified, it can be interpreted in Dutch as a bounded predicate (Vanden Wyngaerd 2001). The intensifier reading can be analysed as having a zero specifier competing for the same position as modifiers of *self*.
4. We follow here the tradition in sign language literature of labeling the signs with words from a spoken language (from the surrounding spoken language or a language known to the reader) in small capitals.
5. 'Mouthing' is the articulation of a word without using voice, usually simultaneous with a manual sign, or stretching over a couple of manual signs.
6. Intensifier and modifiable *self* may have different expressions in spoken languages as well. While in English the intensifier reading is compatible with both 'himself' and 'by himself', only 'by himself' is used in the modified cases that express a grade of involvement of the subject in an action.
7. The symbol '^' indicates that the two signs are prosodically linked. Locations to the left and right of the signer can be used to localize discourse referents. 'INDEX' is often used in sign language literature to indicate referential pointing signs and the subscripts 'left' or 'right' indicate that the (pointing) sign are directed toward (or from in case the subscript precedes the sign gloss) a location associated to a referent.
8. Taking the role of another referent goes by the name of 'role shift' or 'role taking' and is a common phenomenon in sign languages. In this example, the first person (the signer) takes the role of John, thus indicating that John got help. The meaning of the second part of the sentence is "someone (on the right) helped me (= John)"
9. As the sentence in (15) shows, modification of *self* does not always imply help from others. Moreover, the intensifier reading is not, in principle, incompatible with adjuncts expressing 'with the help of'. Therefore, the notion 'assistive' in the sense of 'with or without the help of' would also be applicable for intensifier readings. We therefore prefer not to use the term 'assistive' for modified *self*, as was suggested by one of the reviewers.
10. Stress placement plays a role in the interpretation of modified *self*. As a rule, stress is on *self*. However, if stress is placed on the modifier, a contrast is implied with other degrees of help/actor involvement.
11. We note here that similar observations can be made with respect to *eigen* 'own'. Analogous to *self*, the adjective *eigen* 'own' can be modified, or it can be used as an intensifier, as is observed by Siemund (2000) for the German and English cognates of *eigen*. As with *self*, the intensifier *eigen* is not modifiable.

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