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How reflexive is *selfie*?

A linguistic look at selfies and their hashtags

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This paper aims to examine the semantic development of the word *selfie*. We set out from the definition of a prototypical case, focusing on the question to what extent the concept as it is used at present retains the reflexive relations inherent in its etymology.

1/ Background

In linguistic terms, the English affix *self-* is a marker of reflexivity. It signals that the same referent is responsible for two roles in the event (action or property) indicated by the word—that is, (prototypically) the same individual is both the performer of the action described (subject/agent of the predication, termed the 'agent' role) and the recipient or result of the action, (termed the 'patient' role). To illustrate, *self-defence* designates an action in which the same individual is both the defender (the agent) and the defended (the patient), and *self-propelled* describes an entity that is both the propelling force (agentive) and the object propelled (patient).

The word *selfie*, morphologically derived from the same reflexive marker, is expected to have the same reflexive interpretation as well. But is that really the case? To explore this aspect, I compare the (relatively recent) dictionary definition of the term with a range of attested uses in social media platforms. In order to allow a wider perspective on use of the term online, data was examined on various social

media platforms (some dedicated primarily to the sharing of images: instagram, flickr, imgur, and more general microblogging sites: twitter, facebook, tumblr).

2/ *Selfie* Reflexivity

We begin with the well-publicized definition of *selfie* from the Oxford English Dictionary (added in 2013). I take this definition as designating the prototypical case of a selfie. According to the OED, a selfie is—

"a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media".

This definition, clearly reflexive, involves several components that must be distinguished: the photographer (agent), the individual photographed (patient), and, of course, the photograph itself (also, a patient), as well as the instrument (smartphone) and a purpose—sharing on social networking sites. This definition leads us to distinguish two activities: ‘photography’ on the one hand and ‘(online) sharing’ on the other. Thus, when we examine the use of the term *selfie*, we must consider both activities and the role-players associated with each: photographer–photographed & poster–posted (I do not distinguish the photographed individual/object from the image itself for the moment).

In the prototypical case, all four roles refer to the same individual (photographer=photographed=poster=posted). But, examination of usage clearly shows that this is not always the case. The first breakdown of the reflexivity associated with *selfie* stems from one of the predominant features of social networking sites—the re-sharing of content by other users. A selfie posted or reposted by someone who did not take the original picture is still referred to as a selfie. Thus, we get a mismatch between the two activities. First, the two roles in the sharing activity

need not be associated with the same individual (poster ≠ posted), nor do the two agent roles—photographer and poster—need to be filled by the same individual. (The other side of the coin exists as well: a selfie that is not posted is still a selfie, again leading to a mismatch between the two activities).

Interestingly, unintentional images can also be tagged as selfies (cf. #unintentionalselfie, #surpriseselfie). Such hashtags add to our consideration images that were taken without an agentive creator intent, although they are shared with intent.

A final consideration in the examination of reflexivity relates to the patient roles that surface in the content of the images. The reflexive expectation is that the photographer and the photographed are one and the same. Group selfies, while not providing complete identity, are only one step removed (assuming one of the group is taking the picture). But what of images of objects and places that are labeled as selfies?

This aspect is highlighted by the development of morphological suffixation on the basis of *selfie* (using *-elfie* and *-ie*). This is a playful, creative process which elaborates an open-ended set of selfie types. The suffixed hashtags highlight a particular aspect in the image, focusing on an item in the photograph, whether it is human or not. This range of hashtags spans the gamut of possibilities, starting with the prototypical reflexive self portraits (thus, #felfie is a selfie of a farmer, and an image of one's drunk self is a #drelfie), through partial representations (presumably) of the photographer (an image focusing on hair becomes a #helfie, an image of nails is a #nailie), and down to inanimate objects (a cup of coffee is labeled #coffie, and an image of one's shelves is a #shelfie). Such tags stretch the reflexive relation towards a representative or possessive relation. After all, while they may reflect an aspect of personal experience or character, a coffee or a shelf clearly did not take the picture or post it.

So, what is left of the prototypical four-way reflexivity of a selfie, where the same individual is photographer,

photographed, poster and posted? A selfie need not be taken by the poster, or be taken by the photographed, or represent either one of them, and identity between the two agents is also optional—all, separating the agent and patient roles of both activities. An image can be labeled a selfie even if not photographed with intent, and given automated posting procedures, perhaps not even posted with intent—thus putting a question mark on the prototypical agentivity of the roles. To schematically summarise the range:

photographer = photographed = poster = posted	(prototypical selfie)
photographer ≠ poster	(other people's selfies, reposts, unposted selfies)
photographer ≠ photographed	(#unintentionalselfie, object selfies)
poster ≠ posted	(#unintentionalselfie, object selfies)

The original reflexive sense of *selfie* is clearly predominant both in social media and in offline communication. And yet, the broad and loose semantic extensions of the term lead us to an inevitable question: How far can we stretch the definition? What are the boundaries of the selfie label? Tags like #shelfie, #coffie, #homeselfie, #landscapeselfie or #objectselfie suggest that even images of inanimate objects can be designated selfies. So, can any image become a selfie by virtue of a tag? Does it even have to be an image?