

THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

Thursday 02/07/2026

16:15-17:45

Webb 103

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Self, but not selfish: the interpretation of Hebrew self-anaphors

While it is well established that pronouns permit both bound-variable (sloppy) and coreferential (strict) interpretations, there is no consensus in the linguistic literature regarding the interpretive possibilities of self-anaphors. To clarify the interpretations available to self-anaphors and identify the sources of disagreement, we experimentally investigated how native speakers interpret Hebrew self-anaphors relative to pronouns in *only*-focus constructions. Using an acceptability-rating task, participants rated sentences targeting sloppy, strict, or infelicitous readings, with the infelicitous condition serving as a negative baseline. The results show that the strict reading of self-anaphors is significantly less acceptable than both their sloppy reading and the strict reading of pronouns, receiving highly variable ratings and a mean rating slightly below the scale midpoint. However, it remained significantly higher than the infelicitous baseline. This indicates that while strict interpretations of self-anaphors are disfavored, they are not entirely ruled out by the grammar; rather, they are accepted to a limited extent.

Following previous proposals (Faltz 1977, Weber 1989, Jayaseelan 1996, Schladt 2000, among others), we argue that self-anaphors are complex nominals containing a pronominal core. When processing self-anaphors, the parser defaults to their inherent bound-variable (sloppy) interpretation. To derive a coreferential (strict) reading, the computational system applies Vehicle Change (VC) (Fiengo & May 1994, Abels 2022), reducing the anaphor to its pronominal core. Because VC is required for interpretation rather than convergence, it involves constructing a Reference Set that computes and compares the relevant focus alternatives and their interpretations; carrying out this computation imposes a substantial processing cost (Reinhart 1995, 2006). This explains the variability and relatively low mean acceptability of strict readings of self-anaphors: although the strict reading is not ruled out by the grammar, it is less accessible than the sloppy one. When world knowledge or contextual information disfavors or excludes the sloppy reading, however, the strict interpretation becomes more readily accessible, as expected.

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