

The learnability of the reflexive in Esperanto*

Wim Jansen

Amsterdam Center for Language and Communication

Esperanto is a planned language for international use. Much of its grammar is easily learnable by speakers with all sorts of linguistic backgrounds. The adjectival reflexive possessive is one of the elements in the grammar which is experienced by many learners as a serious difficulty. It is also one of the topics that has caused many debates among scholars and language users in general, who, despite 125 years of intensive linguistic development, have not managed to come up with a universally understandable and workable set of rules and guidelines for practical implementation. Eliminating the obligatory use of the dedicated reflexive possessive adjective is expected to improve the learnability of the language in this respect and would not compromise the clarity of speaker's intentions thanks to the support provided by contextual, pragmatic and semantic considerations. A tolerant attitude toward speakers and writers who avoid the use of the reflexive possessive in controversial constructions and apply non-reflexive possessives instead would be a step in the right direction.

Glosses used in this document

ACC accusative, ADJ adjective, ART article, F female, M male, N noun, ND non-definite (indefinite), NT neuter (sex-irrelevant), PL plural, PRS present tense, PST past tense, REFL reflexive, SG singular, V verb (infinitive mood); 1, 2 and 3: first, second and third person.

1 Introduction

In this paper, the qualifications ‘learnable’ and ‘unlearnable’ are defined in relative terms as ‘easily learnable’ against ‘learnable with great difficulty’. Hence, the ease with which a particular feature like the reflexive in the present object language Esperanto can be learned is a property on a gliding scale that runs from something that can be mastered without much effort to something extremely difficult. Learnability issues concerning the grammar of Esperanto

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refer to the language as an L2 learned by people with widely differing linguistic and cultural backgrounds.¹

Why should we study the learnability of the reflexive in Esperanto, a language that was designed by its author Ludwik L. Zamenhof (1859-1917) to be easily learnable? First of all, it is the way how to use the reflexive possessive that shows conflicting interpretations among many of the different scholarly books and articles about the grammar of the language. In the second place, documented test results and personal experience strengthened the author's impression that this aspect of the reflexive in Esperanto does indeed constitute a structural learnability problem of the language. In what follows, the reflexive is approached using concepts from functional discourse grammar (FDG) as described in Hengeveld and Mackenzie (2008).

Section 2 defines in incremental steps (2.1 and 2.2) the workings of the reflexive in Esperanto. Section 2.3 links these data to a number of milestone documents in the prescriptive esperantological literature published between 1887 and 2005.

Section 3 starts in 3.1 with a cross-section of critical documents that point at the inadequacy of the prescriptive grammars and describe the reflexive possessive as a serious stumbling block for learners with all possible backgrounds. In 3.2 this is explained in a selection of sample cases. Section 4 summarizes the findings.

Section 5 shows in a number of representative cases of recurrent patterns that the substitution of the reflexive possessive by a non-reflexive form does not compromise the interpretability of the speaker's intentions and that at the same time the learnability of the language would be greatly improved. The conclusions in Section 6 state that one major element of the Esperanto reflexive (the possessive) qualifies as unlearnable.

2 Reflexivity in Esperanto

2.1 Introduction into the reflexive

The reflexive in Esperanto has two aspects, which are reminiscent of the compromise between Romance and Slavic inputs evidently sought by Zamenhof. The language applies the third person reflexive personal pronoun *si*, which formally and functionally resembles the Italian *si* and French/Spanish *se*. In addition, it uses the reflexive possessive *sia*, much the way *свой* is used in Russian, but restricted to third person antecedents.

¹ I am not aware of any statistically relevant research data concerning specific learnability problems encountered in the small and dispersed community of L1 speakers of Esperanto.

The three introductory examples below are taken from the most recent authoritative grammar Wennergren (2005). *Si* identifies the participant referred to in a non-subject constituent with that of the subject. Examples of the use of *si* are given in (1) and (2):²

- (1) Karlo lav-as si-n.
Charles wash-PRS 3REFL-ACC
'Charles washes himself.' (Wennergren 2005: 109)

In (1), the reflexive pronoun *sin* 'himself' in its object role refers to the same participant as the subject *Karlo* 'Charles'. In (2) below, *si* embedded in the prepositional phrase *al si* 'to her' refers to the same participant as the subject *Ŝi* 'She':

- (2) Ŝi komb-as al si la har-o-j-n.
3SG.F comb-PRS to 3REFL ART hair-N-PL-ACC
'She is combing her hair.' (Wennergren 2005: 109)

An example of *sia* is given in (3) below, in which the participant *patrinon* 'mother' referred to in the object role is linked to the subject participant *Ŝi* 'She' in such a way that *Ŝi* is the possessor of *patrinon*:

- (3) Ŝi vid-as si-a-n patr-in-o-n.
3SG.F see-PRS 3REFL-ADJ-ACC father-F-N-ACC
'She sees her mother.' (Wennergren 2005: 108)

Clearly, the difference between *si* and *sia* is that in the former case two constituents are co-indexed and refer to one single participant, whereas in the latter the co-indexing establishes a rather secondary possessive relation between two different participants. After this introduction into the basic mechanism of the reflexive in Esperanto, we can proceed toward a more complete description.

2.2 Description of the reflexive

Esperanto has the following personal pronouns: *mi* 'I' (1SG), *vi* 'you' (2SG and 2PL), *li* 'he' (3SG.M), *ŝi* 'she' (3SG.F), *ĝi* 'it' (3SG.NT), *oni* 'one' (3SG.ND), *ni* 'we' (1SG.PL) and *ili* 'they' (3PL). Syntactically, they can all be used as subjects,

² The examples and their grammatical explanations draw on material from Wennergren (2005) who, by and large, continues the tradition established by Kalocsay and Waringhien (see 2.3). All translations, including those of quotations from running text, are mine (WJ), unless specifically mentioned otherwise.

objects or in any prepositional phrase. A pronoun used as a direct object takes the inflection *-n*, which marks the accusative case: *min* ‘me’, *lin* ‘him’, etc. Non-subject applications of *oni* are in practice very rare.³ All pronouns can be used deictically and (in practice, excluding *oni*) anaphorically⁴. In the latter case they may express a coreferential or reflexive relation with an antecedent that occupies the subject position, as illustrated by *min* ‘me’ referring to *mi* ‘I’ in example (4):

- (4) *Mi lav-as mi-n.*
 1SG wash-PRS 1SG-ACC
 ‘I wash myself.’ (Wennergren 2005: 108)

The use of *si* is triggered by the syntactic function of its antecedent, which must be the subject of the (sub)clause that contains *si*. Because *si* is an anaphoric reference to the subject of its clause, it is not allowed to be (part of) the subject itself. Due to the uniqueness of *mi* ‘I’ as the speaker in the communicative context, the co-occurrence of *mi-min* in (4) is an instance of coreference that is interpersonally unambiguous, even out-of-context. The same holds for all other co-occurrences *not* involving third-person participants. Because of the possible multiple presence of third-person participants, co-occurrences of the type *li-li* ‘he-he’ (and *ŝi-ŝi* ‘she-she’, *ĝi-ĝi* ‘it-it’, *ili-ili* ‘they-they’) are not only interpersonally ambiguous (which ‘he’ is deictically pointed at in the second occurrence?), they are also referentially ambiguous in that the subject and the non-subject constituent may or may not refer to the same ‘he’. In order to distinguish between a coreferential and (say) cross-referential relation between the subject and the non-subject constituent, Esperanto applies *li-li* in cross-referencing (the first and second ‘he’ have different referents) and *li-si* in coreferencing (the first and second ‘he’ have the same referent). In the latter case, the dedicated reflexive pronoun *si* is common to all three genders in the singular and plural. In (5) we notice the inflected *sin* ‘himself’ in the direct object role referring to the antecedent *li* ‘he’ in the subject role:

- (5) *Li lav-as si-n.*
 3SG.M wash-PRS 3REFL-ACC
 ‘He washes himself.’ (Wennergren 2005: 108)

³ Interestingly, Fruictier (1907: 29) forbids the use of *oni* as an object, in contrast with Wennergren (2005: 107-108), who accepts *onin* as a regular though rare inflection.

⁴ ‘Endophorically’ would be more precise, but within endophoric references, anaphoric references are much more common than cataphoric references. I will limit the examples to cases of anaphora unless there is a good reason to deviate from this rule.

See also the examples (1) and (2) in the introductory section 2.1. The situation becomes more complex in the presence of non-finite subclauses as in (6) below:

- (6) La sinjor-o ordon-is al la servist-o vest-i sin.
 ART lord-N order-PST to ART servant-N (to) dress-V 3REFL-ACC
 ‘The lord ordered his servant to get dressed.’ (Wennergren 2005: 111)

The inferred subject of the subclause headed by *vesti* ‘to dress’ is *servisto* ‘servant’ and the reflexive *sin* implies that the servant is told to put on his own clothes, not to dress his lordship.

Due to the formal identity or similarity between Esperanto *si* and Italian *si*, French/Spanish *se* and to a lesser extent German/Dutch *sich/zich*, two remarks are in order. First of all, there are no inherently reflexive verbs in Esperanto, i.e. verbs that cannot exist without the use of a reflexive pronoun as part of the predicate rather than being one of its arguments (e.g. French *se souvenir* ‘to remember’, German *sich vergewissern* ‘to verify’, Dutch *zich vergissen* ‘to be mistaken’).⁵ Any transitive verb in Esperanto can take a reflexive pronoun as a direct object, as long as this makes sense. Therefore, based on the transitive verb *mortigi* ‘to kill’, both *mortigi iun* ‘to kill somebody’ and the reflexive *mortigi sin* ‘to kill oneself’ can be formed. On the other hand, and for obvious extralinguistic reasons, we can’t have **naski sin* ‘to give birth to oneself’ in contrast with *naski infanon* ‘to give birth to a child’, both based on the transitive *naski* ‘to give birth’. The second observation concerns the fact that, in contrast with the quoted Romance languages, the Esperanto *si* is exclusively reflexive and cannot be used to passivate an expression.

A particular form of coreference is that between a participant referred to by a possessive adjective in a non-subject constituent and the one referred to by its antecedent in the subject role of the same clause. In (7), the possessive adjective *mia* ‘my’ marked by the *-n* inflection of the accusative case is coreferent with its antecedent *mi* ‘I’:

- (7) Mi vid-as mi-a-n frat-o-n.
 1SG see-PRS 1SG-ADJ-ACC brother-N-ACC
 ‘I see my brother.’ (Wennergren 2005: 108)

⁵ I am not aware of any research done on learnability problems posed by the need to use non-reflexive verbs in Esperanto in those cases where native speakers might intuitively opt for a reflexive solution, e.g. a native speaker of Dutch tempted to render his/her *Ik vergis me* ‘I am mistaken’ by **Mi eraras min* in lieu of *Mi eraras* (the erroneously inserted reflexive is underlined). In any case, such difficulties do not seem to be universal, as the reflexivity of such verbs is not universal either.

Once again, because of the uniqueness of *mi* ‘I’ and *mia* ‘my’ both referring to the speaker in the communicative context, the co-occurrence of *mi-mia(n)* in (7) is a clear instance of interpersonally unambiguous coreference, even out-of-context. The same holds again for all other co-occurrences not involving third-person participants. Because of the possible multiple presence of third person participants, co-occurrences of the type *li-lia* ‘he-his’ (and *ŝi-ŝia* ‘she-her’, *ĝi-ĝia* ‘it-its’, *ili-ilia* ‘they-their’) are interpersonally ambiguous (which ‘he’ is pointed at by ‘his’ as the possessor referent?) and referentially ambiguous (coreference with the subject is neither excluded nor automatic). In order to distinguish between a coreferential and a cross-referential relation between the determiner inside the non-subject constituent and the subject, Esperanto uses *li-lia* in cross-referencing and *li-sia* in coreferencing. In the latter case, the dedicated reflexive possessive *sia* is common to all three genders in the singular and plural. An example of the reflexive possessive *sia* ‘her’, coreferent with the subject *Ŝi* ‘She’, is given in (8):

- (8) *Ŝi nom-is ŝi-n si-a fil-in-o.*
 3SG.F name-PST 3SG.F-ACC 3REFL-ADJ son-F-N
 ‘She called her her daughter.’ (Wennergren 2005: 109)

Possessive adjectives behave morphosyntactically like attributive or predicative adjectives, i.e. they display number and case agreement with the head noun or number agreement with the subject.

2.3 *The reflexive in the prescriptive esperantological literature*

In short, Esperanto has a reflexive personal pronoun *si* and a reflexive possessive adjective *sia* for third person coreference and the use of *si(a)* in a constituent is triggered by its coreference with the syntactic subject within the same clause. If this condition is met, *si(a)* shall be used in lieu of *li(a)*, *ŝi(a)*, *ĝi(a)*, *ili(a)*. I will refer to this as the ‘Main Rule’ governing the reflexive, as it was developed by grammarians who followed and interpreted Zamenhof’s usage. How this happened is summarized in the next paragraphs.

The *Unua Libro* or ‘First Book’ of Esperanto of 1887, sequentially published in five languages in the order Russian, Polish, French, German and English, lists the reflexive pronoun *si* among the personal pronouns, including its translation in these five languages (*себя*, *siebie*, *soi/se*, *sich*, *one’s self*) and the remark that possessives (including the one associated with *si*) are formed by

adding the adjectival ending *-a* to a pronoun (Zamenhof 1968 [1887]: 45)⁶. It does not tell the reader how to use *si* or *sia*. In the model texts that precede the grammar, there are four instances of the usage of *si* (Zamenhof 1968 [1887]: 22 [3x], 25) and two of the possessive *sia* (Zamenhof 1968 [1887]: 22, 23). The *Fundamento de Esperanto* or ‘Foundations of Esperanto’, approved by the first international congress of Esperanto speakers in 1905, adds nothing in terms of grammatical rules, but does contain more model texts, starting in paragraph 10 of its Exercise Section, in which *si* is glossed in five languages (Zamenhof 1963 [1905]: 88, 90)⁷, followed by an increasing number of contrastive examples, particularly in paragraph 18 (Zamenhof 1963 [1905]: 100-101).

There are six records of replies or corrections sent between 1903 and 1909 by Zamenhof to correspondents who inquired about the correct use of the reflexive, all of them focussing on the adjectival possessive. We find them in Zamenhof (1990: 87-89), which is the updated version of his famous *Lingvaj Respondoj* ‘Linguistic Replies’ edited by Gaston Waringhien (Zamenhof 1962). These records do not provide more than ad hoc support in a few randomly raised problem cases. In terms of general use they even cloud the issue in Reply 88 of 1909, in which Zamenhof (through Grabowski, head of the Grammar Section of the ‘Language Committee’, precursor of the Esperanto Academy) admits to bending the rule himself for the sake of greater clarity (Zamenhof 1990: 87-89).

Among the early grammar books which contain a serious attempt to make up for Zamenhof’s lack of explicit rules and to describe the correct use of the reflexive possessive in a variety of contexts, we should note *Esperanta Sintakso* ‘Esperanto Syntax’ (Fruictier 1907).⁸ Its rule 86 (Fruictier 1907: 31) may be called prophetic of the debates that were to follow throughout the century: “*Lia* [his], *sia* [her], *ĝia* [its], *ilia* [their] are used when the item possessed belongs to a person different from the subject of the verb. They are also used in lieu of [the reflexive] *sia* to indicate something belonging to the subject when one is afraid the use of *sia* may be ambiguous.” In other words, whereas Zamenhof’s addition of *sia* to the series of possessive pronouns testifies a desire to reduce ambiguities in the possessive relations among clausal constituents, Fruictier admits that its use can be counterproductive and therefore recommends not to use *sia* in case of doubt (see also the above mentioned Linguistic Reply 88, published two years later). This recommendation survives in the updated version edited by Grenkamp-Kornfeld and published under the title *Kompleta Gramatiko kaj*

⁶ Textual references are made to the photographic reprint of the German version, published in 1968.

⁷ Henceforth, this document will be referred to as the ‘Baseline’. Textual references are made to its scientific edition first published in 1963.

⁸ Paul Fruictier (1879-1947), French national and medical doctor. One of the first influential grammarians of Esperanto.

Vortfarado de Esperanto ‘Complete Grammar and Word Building of Esperanto’ (Fruictier 1930). The fact that this book contains an eleven page appendix entirely dedicated to both the pronominal and adjectival applications of the reflexive (Fruictier 1930: 172-183) illustrates the level of difficulty of this topic.

Fruictier (1930) is one of the cornerstones on which the first all-encompassing grammar of Esperanto is built: *Plena Gramatiko de Esperanto* ‘Complete Grammar of Esperanto’ (Kalocsay and Waringhien 1935), soon to be followed by a thoroughly reworked edition in 1938, which covers the reflexive in seven meticulously formulated paragraphs (Kalocsay and Waringhien 1938: 312-320). Later editions provide basically the same information up to the last reprint under the new title *Plena Analiza Gramatiko de Esperanto* ‘Complete Analytical Grammar of Esperanto’ (Kalocsay and Waringhien 1985: 219-228). Two decades later, many speakers of the language turned to the much more user-friendly Internet grammar *Plena Manlibro de Esperanta Gramatiko* ‘Complete Handbook of the Esperanto Grammar’ as their reference for understanding and correctly handling the grammar, especially after its publication in book form (Wennergren 2005; the reflexive is dealt with on pages 108-116).

All prescriptive grammars quoted above concentrate on the need for a formal referential disambiguation of the linguistic expression at the morphosyntactic level, isolated from its context. It appears difficult, if not impossible, to even find an allusion to the circumstance that reflexivity as a special kind of anaphoric reference doesn’t really work for linguistic expressions which are abstracted away from their textual context and ignore the participants’ knowledge of the world.⁹ This circumstance may explain why all authoritative grammarians needed and continue to need about ten pages densely printed with rules, subrules, exceptions, caveats and unresolved issues to cover in particular the reflexive possessive, whereas the Main Rule doesn’t take up more than 4-5 lines of text. That this has not passed unnoticed will be shown in Section 3.

3 The Esperanto reflexive possessive as a stumbling block?

3.1 Voices from the literature

The reflexive possessive has been a source of errors, an item of uncertain interpretations and a point of criticism since the very beginning of text production in Esperanto. These three facets can be seen as expressions of a single hypothesis, i.e. that the reflexive possessive is a genuine stumbling block and possibly a structural flaw in the design of the language, undermining its

⁹ See for an excellent Dutch-language introduction into this topic: Dik and Kooij (1981: 36).

learnability in this respect. Let us have a look at the following chronological overview, without differentiating between the three facets of the hypothesis and without repeating the curious interpretation by Fruictier (1907: 31) that was quoted in section 2.3 above.

When searching for documentary references to material concerning the reflexive through the pages of the very first periodical in Esperanto, the monthly journal *La Esperantisto* ‘The Esperantist’, one ironically hits five instances of errors made by Zamenhof himself against his own rules concerning the reflexive adjective in just two articles (Zamenhof 1891: 25 (2x), 26 (2x); 1894: 36). This list is by no means intended to be exhaustive, but it is illustrative of the difficulties even experienced by its own author.

In 1907 the monthly journal *La Revuo* ‘The Review’ organized a literary contest by inviting potential authors to submit to an expert jury their manuscripts of short-stories, tales, theatre plays, etc., originally written in Esperanto. In a side-report on the language errors encountered in the material reviewed, the chairman of the earlier mentioned Language Committee, prof. Emile Boirac,¹⁰ with some resignation, refrained from listing individual mistakes in the reflexive possessive (as he did in other areas) and made a single sweeping statement instead (Boirac 1907: 521): “I’d rather not mention the incorrect use of the possessive adjectives *lia*, *ŝia*, *ĝia*, *ilia* and *sia*.” In the same period a reader of the *Oficiala Gazeto* ‘Official Gazette’ (the periodical of the Language Committee) addressed questions about the use of *lia* and *sia* to the editors and submitted a list of ten quotations from Zamenhof’s own works which contained presumed errors in the reflexive, most of them dealing with possessive forms (taking Fruictier 1907 as one of his points of reference). The most interesting answer came again from Boirac, who stated that the “coreferential or reflexive form *sia* is just a side-issue or accessory form [in the language]” and that it would be better if writers of textbooks would “hide the existence of such a coreferential form from their first lessons”, adding that “in the case of doubt, one should always use the direct form, i.e. *lia*, *ŝia*, *ĝia*, *ilia* and not the coreferential *sia*.” (Boirac 1909: 7).

In the book review section of the above mentioned *La Revuo* (1909: 382) we read a positive review of a new textbook of Esperanto for German speaking learners (*Elementarbuch der internationalen Hilfssprache Esperanto* by Emil Stark). The reviewer picks out three mistakes in its presentation of the grammar, two of them in the use of the reflexive possessive.

¹⁰ Emile Boirac (1851-1917), French national, philosopher and rector of the University of Dijon (1902). Important lexicographer, essayist and promotor of Esperanto in intellectual circles.

A detailed critical assessment of the reflexive can be found in Willem Manders' dissertation *Vijf Kunsttalen* 'Five Artificial Languages', Manders (1947: 254). From Zamenhof's own writings Manders (1910-1998) quotes a large number of mistakes in the handling of the reflexive possessive and concludes that "it stands to reason that, given the frequent differences of opinion concerning the reflexive or non-reflexive nature of the possessive, such a distinction, which is absent in many important languages (English, French, German), should be considered undesirable for an artificial language." Manders continues by listing examples of the countless errors he registered among his Esperanto correspondents primarily from Europe and Eastern Asia. In contrast with the difficulty that the reflexive possessive appeared to cause, Manders registered a much better handling of the reflexive pronoun.

An indication of the difficulty caused by the reflexive possessive can also be obtained from the results of a number of language performance verification tests that were carried out at international meetings of Esperanto speakers in Britain, France, (the Federal Republic of) Germany, The Netherlands, Poland and former Yugoslavia between October 1967 and December 1969. The objective of these tests was to investigate the learnability of Esperanto ('how well and how fast') and to establish a scientifically-based reference for comparison with results from similar tests for other major languages. Data were obtained from 238 test persons and the analyses were published, albeit in Esperanto only and in a hardly retrievable reference (Bakker 1974). In this article, the performance of the overall test population is correlated with overall areas like 'grammar' and 'lexicon', without analyzing the specificity of the errors made by the individual test persons.¹¹ From the still available source files I analyzed those results of 112 out of 238 respondents that were related to their knowledge and handling of morphosyntactic structures.¹² The reflexive possessive emerged as the third major source of grammatical errors made by the respondents. The misjudged valency of verbs and the incorrect handling of the accusative marking in its different settings jointly lead the list of frequently made mistakes. Unfortunately the test package contained only one test sentence dedicated to the reflexive. The respondents' task was to choose, out of four options, the correct interpretation of a given linguistic expression containing one reflexive and one non-reflexive possessive; 35 out of 110 valid answers (32%) gave the wrong interpretation. The mother tongues of these respondents (which could not be identified with absolute certainty in all cases) were in alphabetical

¹¹ This original approach is perfectly understandable: the tests were meant to deliver an overall comparison with other languages, not to be a specific selftest of Esperanto.

¹² The full analysis results are assembled in an Excel file and can be obtained from the author.

order Albanian, Dutch, English, French, German, Hungarian, Polish, Swedish and one or more of the Slavic languages spoken in former Yugoslavia.

In more recent times the prolific American essayist Bernard Golden (1925-2008) wrote a number of highly critical essays on the reflexive (Golden 1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1991). In these he describes the (adjectival, possessive) reflexive as “the most complicated grammatical feature of Esperanto” and calls Kalocsay’s and Waringhien’s Complete (Analytical) Grammar a “jungle of rules and exceptions to the rules” in matters of the reflexive (Golden 1982a: 3, 4). He also clearly states that “the user of Esperanto is forced to analyze each sentence in depth in order to find out which words are actional and which noun or pronoun could be the [inferred syntactic] subject of the action” (Golden 1982b: 5). Illuminating, in terms of the learnability prospective taken in the present paper, are the title of Golden (1983: 15): “Is the use of the reflexive learnable?” (meaning the reflexive possessive) and his statement that “such errors [in choosing the right form] are eternal and universal ... because no category of esperantists can escape them, irrespective of one’s mother tongue, intelligence, education or time devoted to the study of Esperanto” (Golden 1991: 4). This statement clearly received independent support from the test results reported above.

In his study *Nia Fundamento sub lupeo* ‘Our Baseline under the Magnifying Glass’, the Dutch scientist and at the time of writing Esperanto veteran Frans Makkink (1907-2006) dedicated a 16 page article to the reflexive (Makkink 1990: 43-58), with much emphasis on the possessive. Makkink is very polemical when criticising the material collected by Kalocsay and Waringhien (1980) in their ‘Complete Analytical Grammar’. His proposal to amend the Baseline (despite its indisputable inviolability since 1905) with regard to the reflexive (see Section 3.2) is typical of the many uncompromising linguistic debates between right and wrong in the Esperanto community.

In his corpus-based grammar, Gledhill (2000: 104) supports Golden by pointing at the complex parsing exercise that may be required from language learners and users: “The use of *si* is usually explained as ‘reference back to the subject’ and is also said not to extend beyond the clause. This causes hesitation in non-finite clauses and other modifying phrases.”

Perhaps, the crux of the reflexivity problem was best described in 1971 by Gaston Waringhien (1901-1991), then president of the Esperanto Academy, who admitted: “The use of the reflexive is a complex matter and that is perhaps why up to now it hasn’t been formulated in a rule. Each case encountered requires from the user a separate decision about the possibly actional nature of the antecedent and the identification of the inferred syntactic subject of the action concerned. Such decisions may vary according to the kind of word root involved, the context and, in the end, the user’s intention and his/her linguistic

habits. This explains why the Academy did try to define practical guidelines, but at the same time respect the freedom of interpretation in cases of doubt” (Aktoj 2007: 67). The guidelines Waringhien refers to preceded this statement (Aktoj 2007: 47), but did not turn out to be of any real use. Nine and fifteen years later, two more editions of the ‘Complete Analytical Grammar’ (co-authored by Waringhien) were to follow, delivering the “jungle of rules” so heavily criticized by Golden (1982a).

Section 3.2 will discuss a number of typical recurrent cases in the literature to demonstrate the nature of the debate.

3.2 *The search for the antecedent*

It appears that the use of the object reflexive *sin* is unproblematic in simple clauses like *La viro vundis sin* ‘The man injured himself’ (Wennergren 2005: 108), which contrasts with *La viro vundis lin* ‘The man injured him’. In more complex clauses with third-person pronouns embedded in a prepositional phrase the syntactic trigger may present a problem to less experienced speakers. In (9):¹³

- (9) *Li sidiĝis sur la seĝo prezentita al li.*
 He sat down on the chair (that was) offered to 3SG.M.
 ‘He sat down on the chair that was offered to him.’ (Aktoj 2007: 48)

a possibly spontaneous co-indexing with the subject *Li* ‘He’ of the main clause is countered by the need to look for the antecedent in the participle headed subclause, which is passive and has the chair as its inferred subject, not the person to be seated on it, reason why *si* cannot be used. Between (10) and (11) a good knowledge of syntactic structures and their parsing is required:

- (10) *Ŝi ekvidis viron staranta antaŭ ŝi.*
 She spotted (a) man standing in front of 3SG.F.
 ‘She spotted a man standing in front of her.’ (Aktoj 2007: 48)

- (11) *Ŝi ekvidis starantan viron antaŭ si.*
 She spotted (a) standing man in front of 3REFL.
 ‘She spotted a standing man in front of her.’ (Aktoj 2007: 48)

¹³ The glossed examples in this Section follow the alignment and coding principles of the Leipzig Glossing Rules only in so far as these are relevant to single out the (non)-reflexive pronouns or possessives under discussion. Care is taken, however, to render glosses as word-by-word translations of the original.

In (10), the present participle *staranta* ‘standing’ does not exhibit case agreement with *viron* ‘man’, so that we are dealing with a participle headed relative clause whose inferred subject is the man, hence *ŝi*. In (11), however, the present participle *starantan* ‘standing’ does show case agreement with *viron* ‘man’, so that it is an attribute of ‘man’ and ‘in front of her’ is an adverbial at the (single) main clause level, permitting the use of *si*.

The use of the possessive *sia* is relatively unproblematic in simple clauses like *Ŝi edziniĝis kun sia kuzo* (Wennergren 2005: 109) ‘She married her (own) cousin’ versus *Ŝi edziniĝis kun ŝia kuzo* ‘she married her (another woman’s) cousin’. Also expressions involving a main clause followed by a subclause containing a straightforward predicate structure with overtly expressed constituents do not seem to give rise to major uncertainties. An Esperanto speaker who wants to express an event that can be described in English by ‘He saw that the dog was playing with its ball’ is likely to produce this as *Li vidis, ke la hundo ludas kun sia pilko* (Wennergren 2005: 109), spontaneously linking *pilko* ‘ball’ to the nearby *hundo* ‘dog’ as its possessor. This speaker probably does not need much convincing before choosing the reflexive *sia* in the given textbook setting.

Although the Main Rule specifies the key role of the subject and does not mention the voice of the construction, speakers are known to be tempted to hesitate between the subject and the semantic agent as the trigger for reflexivity in passive constructions, especially when the proximity of the latter suggests an ‘intimacy’ or ‘ownness’ that is easily attributed to the reflexive possessive. The following two examples (12) and (13) should explain this hesitation:

- (12) Karlo estis akompanata de Petro al si-a domo.
Charles was accompanied by Peter to 3REFL-ADJ house
‘Charles was accompanied by Peter to his (Charles’) house.’
(Wennergren 2005: 110)

versus:

- (13) Karlo estis akompanata de Petro al li-a domo.
Charles was accompanied by Peter to 3SG.M-ADJ house
‘Charles was accompanied by Peter to his (Peter’s) house.’
(Wennergren 2005: 110)

In (12), the reflexive possessive *sia* does not refer to the agent *Petro* in the nearest memory slot, but to the more remote undergoer *Karlo*. In (13) it is the other way round. What is never mentioned in the material reviewed in the Sections 2.3 and 3.1 is that in (12) the choice of *sia* identifies *Karlo* as the

house owner, but that *lia* in (13) does not unambiguously identify *Petro* in that capacity. There may indeed be more male participants in the communicative context who qualify as house owners, even if they do not show up in the isolated expression (13).

Another recurrent complication one may hit is that of a subject that consists of more than one nominal constituent, e.g. ‘Charles and his brother’. It is disallowed to translate this as *Karlo kaj *sia frato*, since *sia* should refer to a subject and not be part of it. In contrast with this, ‘Charles with his brother’ must be *Karlo kun sia frato* (assuming *Karlo* is the subject) because in this case *kun sia frato* is an adverbial modifier at the clause level external to the subject constituent (Wennergren 2005: 109-110). Makkink (1990: 43, 58) quotes this ban on using the reflexive possessive within a complex subject like *Petro kaj *sia/lia edzino* ‘Peter and his (own) wife’ as something that prevents the hearer/reader from understanding whose wife the expression refers to. For this reason he goes as far as proposing a waiver to the Baseline interpretation by allowing the use of *sia* in such cases. The flaw in Makkink’s argumentation is that this interpersonal ambiguity has nothing to do with the question of *lia* being embedded in a complex subject or not. It also persists in (13), as was just demonstrated, and is bound to persist as long as we do not assign a specific pronoun to each single participant in the context, a non-sensical idea which would boil down to replacing proper names by ‘proper pronouns’. In other words, the interpersonal ambiguity will persist as long as the morphosyntactic encoding is looked at in isolation and not as a step that is governed by interpersonal and representational formulations in close interaction with the contextual component, as postulated in FDG.¹⁴

Major doubts are known to arise when a reflexive possessive occurs in more involved constructions. In the following example (14):

- (14) *Petro aŭskultis la plendadon de Karlo pri ĉiuj si-a-j problemoj.*
 Peter listened the complaining of Charles about all 3REFL-ADJ-PL problems
 ‘Peter listened to Charles’ complaining about all his problems.’
 (Wennergren 2005: 112)

the subject of the (single) clause is *Petro* ‘Peter’. The clause contains the nominalized verb *plendadon* ‘complaining’ with *Karlo* ‘Charles’ as its inferred subject, whose overt proximity to *problemoj* ‘problems’ causes the assignment of these problems to *Karlo*, as Wennergren (2005: 112) claims: “As a rule, when

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that Makkink, who is an almost dogmatic defender of the Main Rule, admits in three different contexts that the adoption of *si* has not made Esperanto immune to ambiguities (Makkink 1990: 43, 48, 51).

the inferred subject is overt, this becomes the antecedent the possessive refers to". Therefore, *siaj* is judged correct in (14), though it violates the Main Rule in that a constituent different from the clausal subject is now appointed as the antecedent of the possessive. Makkink strongly criticizes such procedures and insists that a similar expression *Nia frato aŭskultis al ŝia kriadon el sia domo* Makkink (1990: 47) can only mean 'Our brother listened to her shouting from his house', 'his' resulting from the coreference of *sia* with the male clausal subject *nia frato* 'our brother' and not with the inferred subject of the shouting, i.e. the female referred to by *ŝia kriadon* 'her shouting'. In example (15):

- (15) *Ŝi ignoris la flatadon de ŝi-a-j admirantoj.*
 She ignored the flattering by 3SG.F-ADJ-PL admirers
 'She ignored the flattering by her admirers.' (Wennergren 2005: 112)

the subject of the clause is *Ŝi* 'She'. The clause further contains the nominalized verb *flatadon* 'flattering' with *admirantoj* 'admirers' as its inferred subject. Since *admirantoj* has subject status, its attributive possessive cannot be *siaj*, but must be *ŝiaj* 'her'. In this case, the non-reflexive *ŝiaj* violates the Main Rule because, despite its coreference with the clausal subject, it is encoded as *ŝiaj* and not as *siaj*. An earlier example in Kalocsay and Waringhien (1980: 225), similar to (15), quoted the expression *Ŝi...aŭdis la flatojn de siaj/ŝiaj...* 'She...heard the flatterings of her...', in which *flatojn* could be interpreted as the 'repetitive act of flattering' or as 'concrete flattering words'. This illustrated the dilemma even better, because depending on the speaker's intention, i.e. to emphasize the act itself or the result of an act, either one or the other option was to be selected. Makkink (1990: 50), however, refuses to consider the influence of a possible actional status of nominal constituents like *flatojn* on the choice of the possessive pronoun and insists on the sole decisive role to be played by the clausal subject.

Another source of hesitation is found in clauses containing infinitive constructions. In (16):

- (16) *La reĝo sendis voki si-a-n kuraciston.*
 The king sent to call (for) 3REFL-ADJ-ACC doctor.
 'The king sent for his doctor' (Wennergren 2005: 112)

we notice the finite verb form *sendis* 'sent' with its subject *La Reĝo* 'The king' and the infinitive *voki* 'to call for' with an inferred, unexpressed subject that is definitely not the king. The use of *sian* is explained by Wennergren (2005: 112) as follows: "As a rule, the *si*-form [i.e. *sian*, WJ] is used when an inferred

subject is absent and not relevant” (compare this to (11), in which the inferred subject is present). On the other hand, in the more explicit (17):

- (17) La reĝo sendis la serviston voki li-a-n kuraciston.
 The king sent the servant to call (for) 3SG.M-ADJ-ACC doctor
 ‘The king sent the servant to call (for) his doctor.’
 (Wennergren 2005: 112)

the object of the main clause *la serviston* ‘the servant’ overtly embodies the inferred subject of the embedded clause, which is claimed to be the justification for triggering the use of *lian*, referring to the king. Although, except for the presence or absence of the servant, both complex expressions (16) and (17) are identical, and our knowledge of the world tells us that the possessive before the doctor can only refer to the king, the two different forms *sian* and *lian* are applied. In contrast with this, Zamenhof himself did not distinguish between overt and hidden subjects in the embedded clause and applied the non-reflexive solution of (17) also in (16).¹⁵

Participle constructions display their own peculiarities when it comes to the choice of the appropriate referential possessive. The examples (18) and (19) differ from each other in one tiny detail, i.e. in (18) the participle clause is headed by the adjectival *vestita* ‘(who is) dressed’, whereas the single clause in (19) contains the adverbial *vestite* ‘(while being) dressed’:

- (18) Karlo promenis kun virino vestita per si-a plej bela vesto.
 Charles walked with (a) woman dressed in 3REFL-ADJ most beautiful gown
 ‘Charles was walking with a woman who was dressed in her most beautiful gown.’ (Wennergren 2005: 114)
- (19) Karlo promenis kun virino vestite per si-a plej bela vesto.
 Charles walked with (a) woman dressed in 3REFL-ADJ most beautiful clothes
 ‘Charles was walking with a woman dressed in his most beautiful clothes.’
 (Wennergren 2005: 114)

In (18), *sia* refers to *virino* ‘woman’, who is the inferred subject of the participle clause, but in (19) the formally identical *sia* refers to *Karlo* ‘Charles’, who is the subject of the main clause.

Complex postposed modifiers of a nominal phrase may require a treatment which seems to follow linguistic intuition (or go against it for other people) rather than being triggered by the Main Rule. This becomes clear from the

¹⁵ See Aktoj (2007: 67) and Kalocsay and Waringhien (1980: 223).

examples (20) and (21), both originally from Kalocsay and Waringhien (1980: 226):

- (20) *Ili vizitis muzeon faman pro si-a-j belaj pentraĵoj.*
 They visited (a) museum famous for 3REFL-ADJ-PL beautiful paintings
 ‘They visited a museum that was famous for its beautiful paintings.’
 (Wennergren 2005: 115)
- (21) *Picasso vizitis muzeon faman pro li-a-j pentraĵoj.*
 Picasso visited (a) museum famous for 3SG.M-ADJ-PL paintings
 ‘Picasso visited a museum that was famous for his paintings.’
 (Wennergren 2005: 115)

The syntactic structures of the linguistic expressions (20) and (21) are identical. In (20) the clausal subject is *Ili* ‘They’ and the reflexive *siaj* suggests that the paintings belonged to them, i.e. to the visitors. In (21) the clausal subject is Picasso and the non-reflexive *liaj* suggests that the paintings belonged to some other male participant in the communicative setting (‘the museum’ as the non-subject argument would require *ĝiaj* ‘its’). In both cases, however, Wennergren expands the modifier *faman pro...* ‘famous for...’ as *kiu estas fama pro...* ‘that is famous for...’. Under these circumstances, *siaj* in (20) refers to the relative pronoun *kiu* with its antecedent *muzeon* ‘museum’, suggesting that reference is made to the museum’s paintings. The non-reflexive *liaj* in (21), cannot refer to *kiu* and must therefore take *Picasso*, the only eligible male in the setting, as its antecedent (if no male outside this setting is meant), so that reference is made to Picasso’s own paintings. Depending on the way we parse (20) and (21), we may end up with (almost) opposite results.

4 Summary

Esperanto adopts a formal disambiguation technique to distinguish anaphoric coreference from cross-reference when third-person pronouns are used. This referential disambiguation is realized by a dedicated reflexive pronoun *si*, the use of which is governed by a rule referred to as the Main Rule. The following observations may help to explain the difficulty of the reflexive in Esperanto and the adverse impact this has on the learnability of the language:

- 1 Reflexivity is triggered by a syntactic criterion, namely coreference with the subject of the clause. This was copied by Zamenhof from the main Indo-European source languages of Esperanto. The relative advantage of this element of familiarity to many people is counterbalanced by the fact

that the choice of the appropriate pronoun can only be made after the morphosyntactic structure of the linguistic expression as a whole has been selected. This additional loop requires a constant parsing activity from the speaker, who uses Esperanto as an L2 and cannot necessarily draw on reliable native intuitions to make the right choices. This appears to be less cumbersome and controversial with the pronominal *si* than with the possessive *sia*, especially in non-finite subclauses as was demonstrated in the examples (12) through (21) in Section 3.2.

- 2 If we go back to the expression *La viro vundis sin* ‘The man injured himself’ that was discussed in Section 3.2, we see that the use of the (inflected) pronominal *sin* is fully justified in that it identifies the object *sin* through the subject antecedent *viro* with the interpersonal referent of the latter, instead of pointing at a different referent through *lin*. We are dealing here with a basic distinction between participants and between ‘self versus other’ at the level of the arguments in the predicate structure around the nucleus *vund-* ‘injure’. But in *La viro vundis sian malamikon* ‘The man injured his enemy’, there isn’t a shade of doubt as to the ‘otherness’ of the object, undergoer or participant (going up in the FDG hierarchy). It is the qualification *sian* that merely encodes a relation of possession which is of rather secondary importance at the morphosyntactic level. That this is secondary is easily demonstrated in languages in which the possessive is scarcely used in such cases and preference is given to adopting the anonymous definite article. This leads us to what should be called the most fundamental shortcoming in all discussions in the esperantological literature that were briefly reviewed in the Sections 2.3 and 3.1, i.e. the complete neglect of semantic, pragmatic and contextual factors in distinguishing between reflexive and non-reflexive intentions and the exclusive preoccupation with (an anyhow unattainable) morphosyntactic disambiguation.
- 3 Most grammarians try their best to formulate rules for the reflexive possessive, but fail bitterly in terms of establishing *understandable* and *workable* rules. This includes Kalocsay and Waringhien (1935 through 1985) and Wennergren (2005). Many contributions in the popularizing and also scholarly press pivot around intricate sample sentences, aimed at supporting their author’s standpoint and beating any adversary who might want to see things differently. Some of the critics proposed not to mention *sia* in beginner’s courses (like Boirac 1907) or would tacitly support a simplified substandard use of Esperanto with respect to the reflexive possessive (Golden 1991). To my knowledge, only one single critic proposed an amendment to the inviolable Baseline (Makkink 1990), but

this amendment, based on an extension of the use of *sia*, would make things worse rather than improving them.

- 4 That the Baseline is so strictly adhered to is understandable and justified. It has safeguarded a uniform development of the language since 1905 and prevented it from falling apart into mutually competing varieties that would, no doubt, all claim to be better. Asking awkward questions about the choices made by Zamenhof could easily be construed as destructive reformism. On the other hand, adherence to the Baseline should not prevent researchers from subjecting the language to sober investigations about its learnability on strictly linguistic merits, if only to be able to advise textbook writers on those features in the grammar that deserve their special attention.

5 Contrastive examples

In this Section I will recapitulate a number of sample sentences from the Sections 2 and 3 above. The following examples (22) through (30) repeat those examples from the series (3) through (20) in which a form of *sia* was used. They are modified in such a way that in each case *sia* is replaced by a non-reflexive *lia*, *ŝia* or *ĝia*. Example (13), though not containing *sia*, is maintained as (25) to bring out the contrast with (24). The only purpose of proposing this list is to demonstrate that the speaker's intention can easily be guessed using contextual evidence (available, but not necessarily in an isolated expression) and the addressee's knowledge of the world.¹⁶ The speaker him/herself can be helpful in this process by structuring his/her expressions in such a way as to steer the addressee toward the intended interpretation; see the comment under (24).

- (22) *Ŝi vid-as ŝi-a-n patr-in-o-n.*
 3SG.F see-PRS 3SG.F-ADJ-ACC father-F-N-ACC
 'She sees her mother.'

Modification of (3) from Wennergren (2005: 108). Contextual evidence is expected to identify *patrinon* 'mother' as the subject's mother or some other woman's mother.

- (23) *Ŝi nom-is ŝi-n ŝi-a fil-in-o.*
 3SG.F name-PST 3SG.F-ACC 3SG.F-ADJ son-F-N
 'She called her her daughter.'

Modification of (8) from Wennergren (2005: 109). In addition to contextual evidence, knowledge of the world tells us that the most

¹⁶ A more complete file of analyses of the content of Makkink (1990) can be obtained from the author.

plausible interpretation is that of the subject calling the object her own daughter and not some other woman's daughter.

- (24) Karlo estis akompanata al li-a domo de Petro.
Charles was accompanied to 3SG.M-ADJ house by Peter
'Charles was accompanied by Peter to his (Charles') house.'
Modification of (12) from Wennergren (2005: 110). With respect to (12) the constituent order is changed to reflect the principle that 'what belongs together should stick together' (see e.g. Faulhaber 1965: 26 and Kalocsay and Waringhien 1980: 361) and to support the undoubtedly available contextual evidence that the house is Charles'.
- (25) Karlo estis akompanata de Petro al li-a domo.
Charles was accompanied by Peter to 3SG.M-ADJ house
'Charles was accompanied by Peter to his (Peter's) house.'
Modification of (13) from Wennergren (2005: 110). For support to identify the house as Peter's see the comment under (24).
- (26) Petro aŭskultis la plendadon de Karlo pri ĉiuj li-a-j problemoj.
Peter listened the complaining of Charles about all 3SG.M-ADJ-PL problems
'Peter listened to Charles' complaining about all his problems.'
Modification of (14) from Wennergren (2005: 112). Contextual evidence and the closeness of *liaj* 'his' to *Karlo* 'Charles' should support the interpretation that the problems are Charles'.
- (27) La reĝo sendis voki li-a-n kuraciston.
The king sent to call (for) 3SG.M-ADJ-ACC doctor.
'The king sent for his doctor'
Modification of (163) from Wennergren (2005: 112). The most plausible interpretation is that it was the king's own doctor that was called. If not, there should be ample contextual evidence to make it clear who's doctor it was.
- (28) Karlo promenis kun virino vestita per ŝi-a plej bela vesto.
Charles walked with (a) woman dressed in 3SG.F-ADJ most beautiful gown
'Charles was walking with a woman who was dressed in her most beautiful gown.'
Modification of (18) from Wennergren (2005: 114). With one male and one female participant in this expression it should not be difficult to conclude that *ŝia* 'her' refers to the *virino* 'woman' it closely follows. It seems far-fetched to suppose the woman was dressed in some other woman's clothes and, if so, there should be contextual evidence to support this.

- (29) Karlo promenis kun virino vestite per li-a plej bela vesto.
Charles walked with (a) woman dressed in 3SG.M-ADJ most beautiful clothes
'Charles was walking with a woman dressed in his most beautiful clothes.'
Modification of (19) from Wennergren (2005: 114). This is the reverse of (28).
- (30) Ili vizitis muzeon faman pro ĝi-a-j belaj pentraĵoj.
They visited (a) museum famous for 3SG.NT-ADJ-PL beautiful paintings
'They visited a museum that was famous for its beautiful paintings.'
Modification of (20) from Wennergren (2005: 115). Within the expression there is only one possible antecedent of *ĝiaj* 'its', i.e. the inanimate *muzeon* 'museum'. In the improbable event that *ĝiaj* refers to some other museum, there should be ample contextual evidence to support this.

6 Conclusions

With or without a learnable reflexive possessive, Esperanto works to the satisfaction of its speakers even though there is no agreed set of rules to explain its workings and no reliable set of guidelines to teach the student how to use this possessive correctly other than in simple, straightforward clauses. It is a source of frequent mistakes, but speakers and writers have learned to live with their mistakes, which do not seem to hinder the mutual understanding people seek when using Esperanto. No doubt, many people resort to alternative constructions when facing a decision concerning the use of reflexive or non-reflexive possessive adjectives they do not feel comfortable with. A substandard usage of the language by adopting the reflexive *sia* in clear-cut cases only is also likely to be widespread. Last but not least, it is probable that many mistakes in the use of *lia*, *ŝia*, *ĝia*, *ilia* are not even recognized as such because knowledge of the world, contextual information plus pragmatic and semantic support unambiguously point at the correct interpretation, whether there is formal, morphosyntactic support by *sia* or not.

In sum, in terms of learnable versus unlearnable aspects of grammatical features, my conclusions concerning the Esperanto reflexive read as follows:

1. The reflexive pronoun *si* is learnable: in its direct object form *sin* or embedded as *si* in a prepositional phrase like *al si* 'to him/herself', *pri si* 'about him/herself' etc., it reportedly does not pose a *generic* learnability problem to the average learner. Difficulties associated with the proper use of *si* can be described in terms of the typological distance between

- Esperanto and the mother tongue of the learner and of other specific, individual rather than generic conditions.
2. The reflexive possessive *sia* is not learnable: it poses a *generic* and serious learnability problem to the learner, irrespective of his/her mother tongue (although the detailed way the learnability problem manifests itself may vary depending on the learner's mother tongue).
 3. The distinction between the reflexive possessive *sia* and its non-reflexive counterparts *lia*, *ŝia*, *ĝia* and *ilia* is not indispensable to support a correct interpretation of the speaker's intentions. The examples (22) through (30) demonstrated how calling up the basic sex and number distinctions M, F, NT, SG, PL in *lia*, *ŝia*, *ĝia*, *ilia* and factoring in contextual evidence and knowledge of the world allow the hearer to identify the intended referent. Even though it could be helpful for the hearer if there was a formally identifiable way to support the interpretation of a possessive relation as being reflexive or non-reflexive, the syntactically triggered *sia* in Esperanto appears to throw up a major obstacle to the language learner and to the speaker. It may be expected that Esperanto would be easier to learn and work with if the compulsory use of *sia* were to be removed from the language. Such a step would eliminate the need for the speaker to resort to substandard language usage or to adopt evasive strategies, and for the hearer to accept this and to be tacitly forgiving when faced with formally incorrect language usage.

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