

Self as a minimal disposition

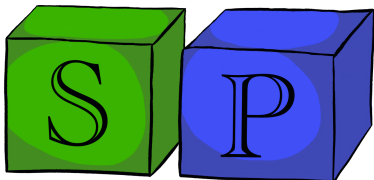
Dr. Julie Goncharov

University of Göttingen/University of Graz

COCOA

October 10, 2025

Semantics or pragmatics?



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1. Semantic meaning

common nouns, adjectives, verbs, ...



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common nouns, adjectives, verbs, ...
2. Pragmatic meaning
focus particles, discourse particles,
hesitation and politeness markers



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3. Semantic and pragmatic meaning
context-dependent expressions,
expressions with presuppositional
content, focus-inducing expressions



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Semantics or pragmatics?

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Presupposition: Other people have also learned German.

$$\llbracket \text{self} \rrbracket^f = \{f \mid f \text{ maps the speaker onto a contextually salient individual} \}$$

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$\llbracket \text{self} \rrbracket = \text{ID} = \lambda x.x$ *minimal disposition*

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context-dependent expressions,
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\therefore *Self-intensifiers* can inform us about semantic components in a sentence, especially related to agency, causation, and event representation

Plan of the talk

1. Background
2. Autonomous *self*
3. Minimal pairs
4. Minimal disposition
5. Discussion

Background

(1) **Additive**

Don't tell me how difficult it is to learn German.

I have learned it **myself**.

Edmondson and Plank 1978; Browning 1993; Siemund 2000; Hole 2002; Gast 2006 a.o.

Background

(1) **Additive**

Don't tell me how difficult it is to learn German.
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(2) **Substitutional**

I wanted my wife to learn German and help me,
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I wanted my wife to learn German and help me,
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(3) **Autonomous**

Nobody has taught me German.
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Background

$$\llbracket \text{self}_F \rrbracket^o = \text{Lift}(\text{ID}) = \lambda Q_{e,et} \lambda y \lambda x. Q(\text{ID}(x), y)$$

$$\llbracket \text{self}_F \rrbracket^f = \{ \text{Lift}(f) \mid f \text{ is a contextually salient alternative to ID} \}$$

In context c , $\text{EmphAssert} (\llbracket S \rrbracket^o, \llbracket S \rrbracket^f)$

asserts

$\llbracket S \rrbracket^o$

presupposes $\forall p \in \llbracket S \rrbracket^f \neq \llbracket S \rrbracket^o : \llbracket S \rrbracket^o <_c p$

Rooth 1992; Krifka 1995; Eckardt 2001

Background

I have learned German **myself**.

Assertion: $\llbracket \text{I learned German myself}_F \rrbracket^o = \text{learn}(\text{sp.}, \text{German})$

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Additive *Don't tell me how difficult it is to learn German...*

{ f | f maps the speaker onto a contextually salient individual who could also learn German }

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Autonomous ‘self’

- (4) Die Polizisten versperren den Taleingang **selbst**.
‘the police block up the valley-entrance themselves’

- (5) #Der Gletscher versperrt den Taleingang **selbst**.
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Autonomous ‘self’

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- (5) #Der Gletscher versperrt den Taleingang **selbst**.
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- (6) Der Stern wurde nicht von einem schwarzen Loch zerstört,
‘the star was not by a black hole destroyed,
er zerstörte sich **selbst**.
it destroyed REFL itself’

Hole 2002; Gast 2006

Autonomous 'self'

(5) '#the glacier blocks up the valley-entrance itself'

(6) 'the star destroyed REFL itself'

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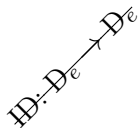
a dispositional property manifested in the event

Autonomous 'self'

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a categorical property (e.g., size)
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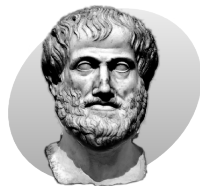
- (4) 'the police block up the valley-entrance themselves'
agency is a dispositional property
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a categorical property (e.g., size)
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a dispositional property manifested in the event



Autonomous ‘self’

*“soul ... is characterized
... by the powers of self-
nutrition, sensation, thinking,
and motivity”*

– Aristotle *De Anima*, 2.1, 413b



Shepherd 2021

Autonomous 'self'

- (7) Any business that stores sufficiently large amounts of hazardous waste can be a storage facility even if it is merely storing the waste that it produced **itself** on the site where it was produced.

- (8) It seems that the Cool Rhythm unit was designed to filter out any interference it caused **itself**, but when the PlayStation is connected to the computer [...] the stereo speakers experienced a distinct and annoying 'buzz'.

Gast 2006

Minimal pairs

- (5) #Der Gletscher versperrt den Taleingang **selbst**.
‘the glacier blocks up the valley-entrance itself’
- (6) Der Stern wurde nicht von einem schwarzen Loch zerstört,
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it destroyed REFL itself’

Minimal pairs

Three types of verbs

- (9) Sie hat gelacht. Es wurde gelacht. unergative
 'she laughed' 'it was laughed'

Minimal pairs

Three types of verbs

- | | | | |
|------|--------------------------------------|---|--------------|
| (9) | Sie hat gelacht.
'she laughed' | Es wurde gelacht.
'it was laughed' | unergative |
| (10) | Sie ist angekommen.
'she arrived' | *Es wurde angekommen.
'it was arrived' | unaccusative |

Minimal pairs

Three types of verbs

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'it was arrived' | unaccusative |
| (11) | Sie hat geblutet.
'she bled' | *Es wurde geblutet.
'it was bled' | emission |

Perlmutter 1978, Zaenen 1988, Pross 2019

Minimal pairs

Emission verbs dispositional meaning

- (12) Die Tablette hat **selbst** gewirkt. *Es wurde gewirkt.
'the pill took effect itself' 'it was taken effect'

Minimal pairs

Emission verbs **dispositional meaning**

- (12) Die Tablette hat **selbst** gewirkt. *Es wurde gewirkt.
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- (13) Das Caesium hat **selbst** gestrahlt. *Es wurde gestrahlt.
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Emission verbs **dispositional meaning**

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- (13) Das Caesium hat **selbst** gestrahlt. *Es wurde gestrahlt.
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- (14) Die Blume hat **selbst** geblüht. *Es wurde geblüht.
‘the flower bloomed itself’ ‘it was bloomed’

Minimal pairs

Unaccusative verbs **dispositional meaning**

- (15) Die Pflanze ist **selbst** gewachsen.
'the plant grew itself'

Minimal pairs

Unaccusative verbs **dispositional meaning**

- (15) Die Pflanze ist **selbst** gewachsen.
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- (16) Der Tisch ist **selbst** umgefallen.
'the table fell over itself'

Minimal pairs

Unaccusative verbs **dispositional meaning**

- (15) Die Pflanze ist **selbst** gewachsen.
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- (16) Der Tisch ist **selbst** umgefallen.
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- (17) Das Wasser ist **selbst** geflossen.
‘the water flowed itself’

Minimal pairs

Unaccusative verbs no dispositional meaning

- (18) #Der Zug ist **selbst** angekommen.
'the train arrived itself'

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- (18) #Der Zug ist **selbst** angekommen.
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'the broadcast started to run itself'

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improve in a spooky, magic, or automatic scenario

Minimal pairs

Autonomous *self* with inanimate associates

- ✓ emission verbs
- ✓ unaccusative verbs with dispositional meaning
- ✓ unaccusative verbs without dispositional meaning but in a spooky, magic, or automatic scenario
- ✗ unaccusative verbs without dispositional meaning and not in a spooky, magic, or automatic scenario

Minimal disposition

x is disposed to M when C iff x has an intrinsic property B such that, if it were the case that C , then C and B would jointly cause x to M

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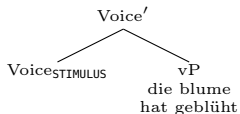
e.g., the glass is disposed to break when struck iff the glass has an intrinsic property such that, in virtue of this property, it would break when struck

Lewis 1997, Manley and Wasserman 2007, cf. Vetter 2015

Minimal disposition

Emission verbs dispositional meaning

Die Blume hat selbst geblüht.
'the flower bloomed itself'

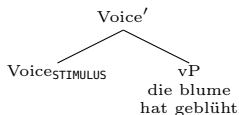


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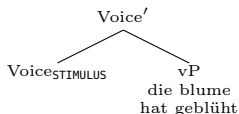
$\llbracket \text{vP} \rrbracket^{g,c} =$
 $\lambda p \lambda e. \text{ bloomed}(\text{flower})(p) \wedge \text{MANIFEST}(e)(p)$



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Emission verbs dispositional meaning

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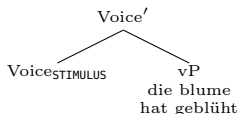
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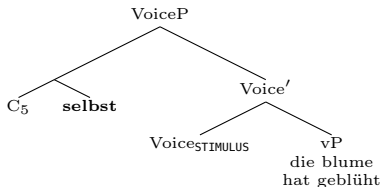
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Emission verbs **dispositional meaning**

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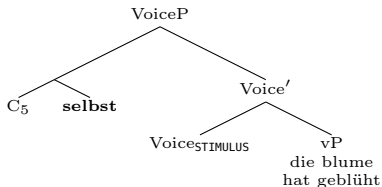


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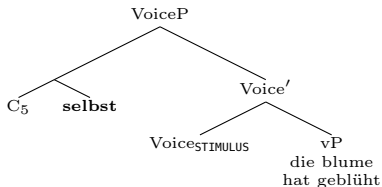
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Minimal disposition

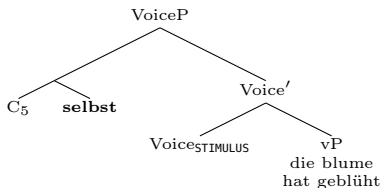
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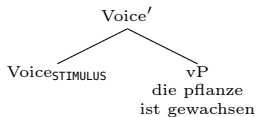
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Minimal disposition

Unaccusative verbs **dispositional meaning**

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'the plant grew itself'

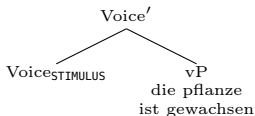


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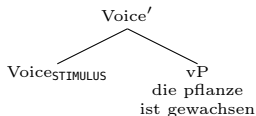
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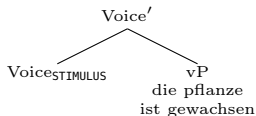
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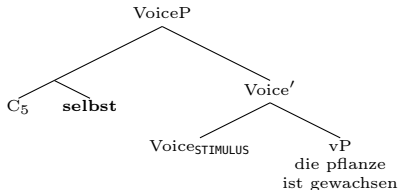
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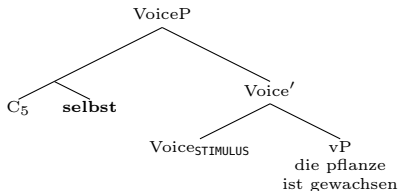


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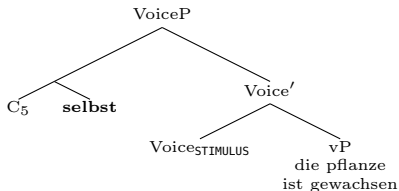
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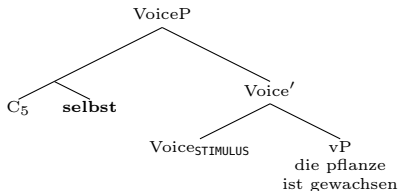
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Minimal disposition

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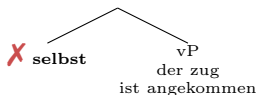
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Minimal disposition

Unaccusative verbs no dispositional meaning

#Der Zug ist selbst angekommen.
'the train arrived itself'



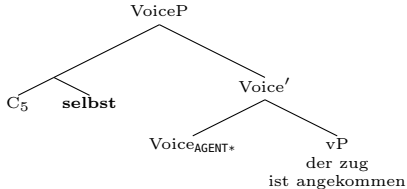
$[[vP]]^{g,c} =$

$\lambda e. \text{arrived}(\text{train})(e)$

Minimal disposition

Unaccusative verbs no dispositional meaning

Der Zug ist selbst angekommen.
'the train arrived itself'

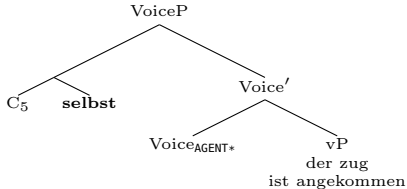


spooky, magic, automatic scenarios

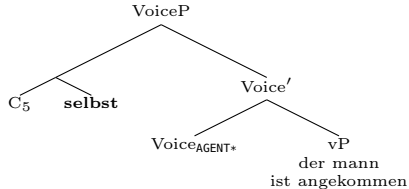
Minimal disposition

Unaccusative verbs no dispositional meaning

Der Zug ist selbst angekommen.
'the train arrived itself'



Der Mann ist selbst angekommen.
'the man arrived himself'



spooky, magic, automatic scenarios

Minimal disposition

LF: [EVEN [[C₅ **selbst**_F] [Voice_{STIMULUS} [the flower bloomed]]]

Minimal disposition

LF: [EVEN [[C₅ **selbst**_F] [Voice_{STIMULUS} [the flower bloomed]]]

[S]^o

= $\exists p \exists e : \text{bloomed}(\text{flower})(p) \wedge \text{MANIFEST}(e)(p) \wedge \text{STIMULUS}(C_{min})(p)(e)$

\approx the flower bloomed by virtue of its intrinsic structure (minimal disposition)

Minimal disposition

LF: [EVEN [[C₅ **selbst**_F] [Voice_{STIMULUS} [the flower bloomed]]]]

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[S]^f

= $\{ \exists p \exists e : \text{bloomed}(\text{flower})(p) \wedge \text{MANIFEST}(e)(p) \wedge \text{STIMULUS}(C')(p)(e) \mid C_{min} \subset C' \}$
 \approx a set of superset conditions under which the flower could bloom

Minimal disposition

LF: [EVEN [[C₅ **selbst**_F] [Voice_{STIMULUS} [the flower bloomed]]]]

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 \approx a set of superset conditions under which the flower could bloom

The presupposition of EVEN:

$\forall q \in [S]^f : q \neq [S]^o \rightarrow [S]^o <_c q$

\approx the blooming of the flower by virtue of its intrinsic structure is less likely than when additional factors are involved

Discussion

Summary

Die Blume hat **selbst** geblüht.
'the flower bloomed itself'

$\llbracket \text{selbst} \rrbracket^o = \text{ID} = \lambda x.x$

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Die Blume hat **selbst** geblüht.
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$$[[C_5 \text{ selbst}]]^o = C_{min}$$

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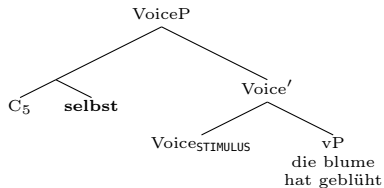
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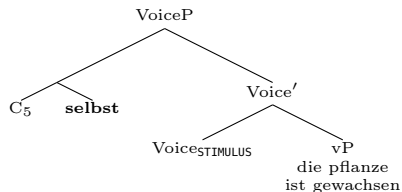
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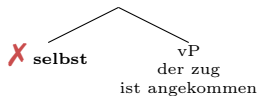
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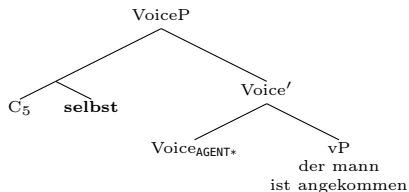
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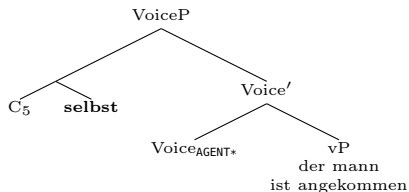
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\therefore *Self*-intensifiers can inform us about semantic components in a sentence, especially related to agency, causation, and event representation

Discussion

Open questions:

- Alternatives to dispositions: abilities, causes, influences, ...
- Transitive verbs, including reflexives
- Causative alternation
- Extension to other readings of *self*: additive, substitutional
- Interaction with negation
- Analysis of *von selbst* ‘by itself’ and *von alleine* ‘on its own’

Merci!

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