

What Is a *Self*?

Self is the only person whom we know nothing about.

1826 B. DISRAELI *Vivian Grey* I. IX. 63

(cited from the OED under the value *self*)

The concept of *self* as an expression of one's personality or identity seems to be gaining ground in various fields as technology and technology-based concepts are infiltrating our lives and lifestyles. It occurs as the usage of Internet and social media in particular increases continuously (Brooks 2015, 26). It seems that depending on whether media is being used in a passive, active or interactive way (as we do with social media), there are different aspects of the self that are involved in the process (Cupchik 2001, 318). When people use the Internet nowadays, they often interact with other people or perform searches on different topics in order to reflect their personality, identity or even their own image. For example, people today seem to upload more and more pictures of themselves- called "selfies"- and perform searches looking for people who are similar to them in interests and acquaintance in order to strengthen their self- image.

Reading different aesthetic, psychological and technological literature, it is my belief that the word *self* seems to appear more often than previously in the esthetic and psychological discourse. Therefore it seems necessary to go back to the roots and origin of the word, find out where it comes from and discuss the latest transformations this word has underwent. Here are some examples of *self* which show the main grammatical roles this word can undertake:

(Example 1.) as a pronoun: "Now the heavens' Guardian, God himself, is with us."
(translation to English from Old English by *A Clerk of Oxford*)

(Example 2.) as an adjective: "...the potentialof self-awareness... has always been there" (Cupchik 2011, 323)

(Example 3.) as a noun: ..."those who dislike any tampering with our personality, who dread that this invading analysis may steal their very self away." (Luckhurst 2006, 175)

In my essay I will explore the changes occurred specifically in the years 1990-2012 to the word *self*. In addition I will claim that in its function as a noun, the word entered the aesthetic and psychological discourse, which it was not such a vivid part of previously to this period. Therefore, the word *self* is shifting from a usage primarily as an adjective and a pronoun towards a noun.

Benjamin Disraeli wrote in 1826 that "Self is the only person whom we know nothing about" (Disraeli 2012, chap.9). I think this phrase embodies well the confusion readers in 2015 feel

towards the word. Does the word *self* refer to 'oneself', 'individual', 'soul', 'identity', 'personality' or something else? In order to untangle the knot, I propose an initial historical examination of the term *self* followed by a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the word, in order to check for possibly more recent changes in the usage of the word.

The materials used in this research are the *Oxford English Dictionary* (referred to as OED later in the text) and the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (referred to as COCA later on in the text). The OED is a historical dictionary of the English language which displays the semantic development of words over time. It was chosen for providing a historical analysis of semantic development through quotations. Similarly, I chose COCA in order to investigate more recent changes in the usage of the word divided into time periods and context shown by phrasal citations.

In order to maximize the accuracy of my results in COCA, I will briefly elaborate on how the search was done. COCA is a database of American English texts, which provides information about American texts written between the years 1990-2012. In my search I wished to increase the probability that *self* will appear as a noun. Therefore, I used the keywords: '. Self'- as the first word in the phrase, 'the self'- preceded by a determiner, and 'the self .'- as the last word in the phrase. In order to isolate occurrences of *self* as a noun which is not a part of a compound form such as 'self esteem' or 'self efficiency', I discovered it had to appear as the last word in the phrase, preceded by the determiner 'the' and followed by a full stop. In the next lines I will attempt to simplify and summarize the diversity of concepts I found in my search for the "true self".

When one consults the OED, one finds 32 pages of definitions and citations related to *self*. This term was first recorded as a pronoun in 888 A.D., in the period known as Old English. It is the equivalent of the term *ipse* in Latin which "indicate[s] emphatically that the reference is to the person or thing mentioned" (OED 2015); see example 1. Around the same time, in 893 A.D., the meaning of 'very' was also recorded, and in 1516, even the meanings 'own, peculiar' were found. In addition to its function as a pronoun, in 900, *self* was recorded as an adjective as well, with different uses such as: 'same'- as in homogenous colour, not blended, and 'piece of or part of the instrument itself'- same material as the garment or different nature than the surrounding. The last meaning was identified in 1888. As an adjective, it precedes another noun, such as in example 2.

Indeed, since its appearance in 888 *self* has been used as a pronoun and an adjective. However, in the period of Middle English, *self* became a noun as well. Its meaning started with 'himself', as 'the subject of an action', and then diversified into 'soul-mate' and 'itself'. Around 1600 the word began to be used with an additional meaning, a more philosophical one of "That which in a person is really and intrinsically *he*" or "a permanent subject of successive and varying states of consciousness" (OED 2015) as demonstrated in example 3.

Regarding these last two meanings of the word, I will suggest later on in the text that current users of English would put *self*, in its grammatical role as a noun, in a psychological context and would relate it to 'personality', 'identity', 'soul', 'a part of one's personality' or even the 'individual' as a whole. Another meaning of *self* mentioned in the OED relates to 'selfishness'

and is juxtaposed to *God* in order to create a contrast. Finally, as recently as in 1948 the term was coined in the field of immunology as “distinct from *foreign*, therefore not attacked by the immune system” (OED 2015).

After having looked into the diversity of grammatical roles—pronoun, adjective and noun—as well as its meanings, I would like to concentrate on the usage of *self* as a noun, and furthermore focus on a recent time period. Therefore, I chose to use COCA and check the frequency of *self* as a noun. In order to be precise, I isolated *self* from its compound forms which today often do not take a hyphen, such as self esteem, self destruction etc. In order to do so, I chose to look for *self* in combination with the determiner *the*- keyword 'the self'. In addition I looked for the frequency of the word *self* as the first word in the sentence—keyword '. Self'—in order to try and isolate cases where *self* is the subject of the clause.

A free search of the word *self* in COCA gives approximately 17,000 citations divided into different subcategories shown in Figure 1.

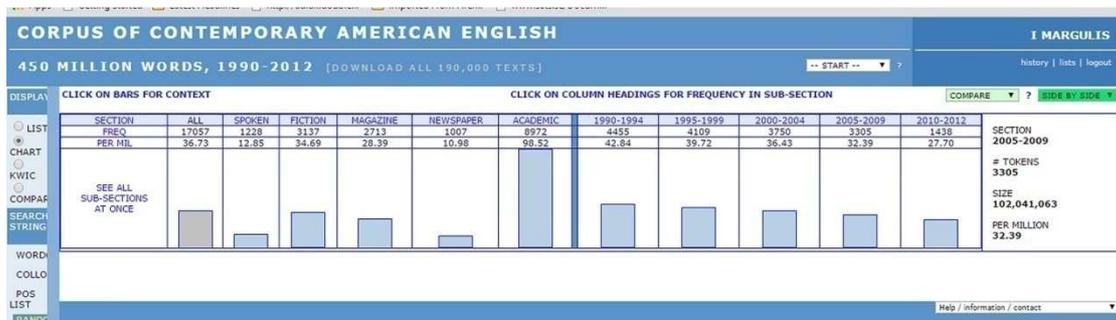


Figure1. Search for *self*, divided into time periods and subcategories (named context).

As shown, most of the results are in the academic context (approximately 9,000). Since we would like to refine the search and eliminate as much as possible the usage of the word as part of a pronoun or as an adjective, I decided to use two keywords searches: the first one is '. Self' which eliminates the form from being a pronoun (such as myself, himself etc.) demonstrated in Figure 2.

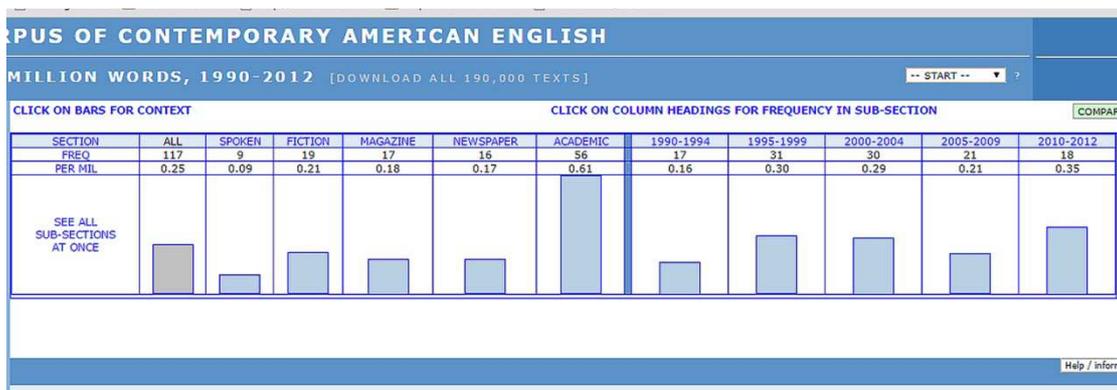


Figure 2. Search for the phrase '. self' divided into time periods and context.

As shown in Figure 2, 117 occurrences were identified when performing a search for the phrase 'Self' which excludes pronoun forms; almost half of them are found in the academic context. In addition, by looking at the column chart, one can see that the word *self* is generally increasing in usage, especially in the most recent years, 2010-2012, in comparison to the period prior to that (2005-2009).

The second keyword I used for the sake of accuracy was 'the self', in order to ensure that the phrase will be a noun, or part of a noun phrase. That search produced 3,189 results. Approximately 2,500 of them are found in an academic context shown in Figure 3.

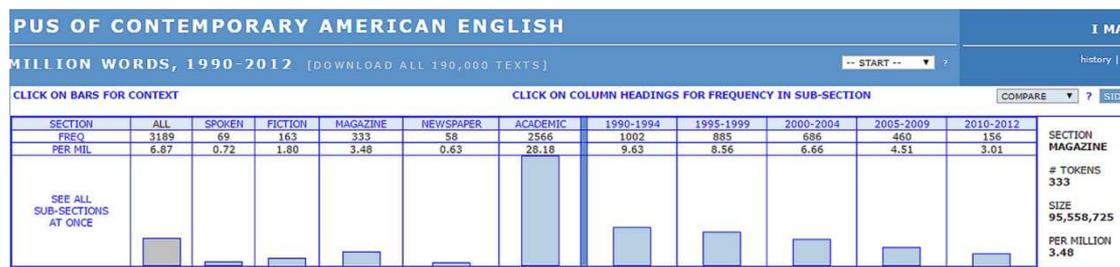


Figure 3. Search for the phrase *the self*, divided into time periods and context.

When I sampled 200 of those 3,189 occurrences, I found that as many as 191 of the 200 results were examples of *self* as a noun. However, I wanted to isolate the cases where 'the self' is not a part of a compound phrase, such as 'the self efficiency'. In order to do so, I performed a search for the keyword 'the self .' (which is evidently a part of the 3,189 above mentioned occurrences). There I found only 442 occurrences shown in Figure 4.

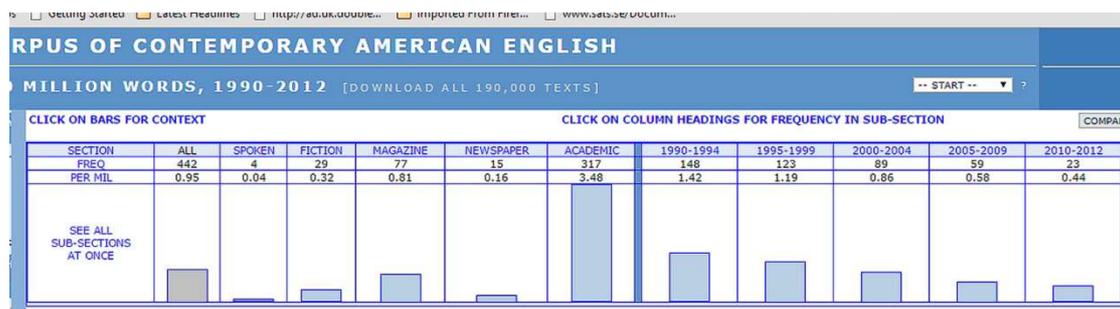


Figure 4. Search for the phrase *the self .*, divided into time periods and context.

One can see again that most results were found in the academic context. In order to analyze in depth these citations, from the 442 results I sampled 200. This sample which I am going to discuss largely in the next paragraphs is at the basis of my conclusions regarding the usage of the word *self*, as it appears purely in the grammatical role of a noun in the years 1990-2012. In the following lines I will present the quantitative results regarding the keyword 'the self .' and explain my findings.

When examining in depth the citations extracted randomly by COCA for the phrasal search 'the self.' found in Appendix A., one finds that the word *self* is used in a variety of meanings. In order to facilitate a conclusion, I categorized the meanings as 'soul', 'individual', 'individual/soul' or 'other' ('individual/personality', 'personality' or 'identity/soul') demonstrated in examples (1)- (4).

- (1) *Self* as 'an individual'- "...a path of spiritual discipline- for the sake of the soul of the self". (result No.52)
- (2) *Self* as 'soul'- "...a few happy feelings about the entity known as the self". (result No. 183)
- (3) *Self* as 'individual/soul'- "the instruments should be complementary, each adding a unique contribution to understanding the self". (result No.23)
- (4) *Self* as 'other'- "...People who hide are denying a basic part of the self." (result No. 48)

In addition I divided the random citations into chronological subsequent time periods, such as those offered in COCA: 1990-1994, 1995-1999, 2000-2004, 2005-2009, 2010-2012. My findings are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Division of the word *self* by meaning and time period.

Year/meaning	Field most represented	Total	'individual'	'soul'	'individual/soul'	other
1990-1994		64	9	27	10	18
1995-1999		55	9	28	7	11
2000-2004		43	17	6	6	14
2005-2009		27	9	8	9	2
2010-2012		10	5	1	2	2

Since I randomly sampled the 442 citations found for the keyword 'the self .', the sample does not truthfully represent the division of frequency over time. In addition, I had to regroup the citations by time period as shown in the table in order to be able to make a statement regarding a certain meaning during a specific period of time. When doing so, I found that the meaning of *self* was most prominent as 'soul' in the 1990's; 27 occurrences in 1990-1994 and 28 occurrences in 1995-1999. Notwithstanding, in the period of 2000-2012 the meaning 'individual' was the most prominent; 17 occurrences in 2000-2004, 9 occurrences in 2005-2009 and 5 in 2010-2012.

Among the different meanings of *self* as a noun, I found a few occurrences of the meaning 'himself', 'themselves' etc. This finding surprised me since I believe that the word *self* is much broader than the above mentioned pronouns. Nonetheless, this meaning echoes the original meaning of the word, as it was recorded in 888 A.D. In those results where *self* could be exchanged with 'himself' or 'themselves', the meaning could as well be 'individual' or 'identity'. For example, result No. 193 "...hatred toward others requires understanding of

minority groups, diverse cultures, and the self.” shows this ambiguity of meanings which leaves the reader wondering; which term did the author exactly aim for?

In addition, I observed that in order to convey the meaning of 'individual', *self* is juxtaposed with 'environment', 'other', whereas when the meaning is 'soul', *self* is often contrasted with 'God', 'body' or 'world'. Here I bring some examples of these dichotomies:

- (5) *Self* as 'individual', contrasted with 'environment'- “Yin action is conscious of the environment, yang action is conscious of the self...” (result No. 138)
- (6) *Self* as 'soul', contrasted with 'God'-“...accepting God's will must be actively cultivated through work on the self.” (result No. 65)

By looking on the representation of *self* and its meanings between the years 1990 and 2012, I conclude that *self* has changed direction during these two centuries. From appearing often in a theological or anthropological meaning, the meaning of *self* has shifted and broadened to philosophy, psychology, arts and social studies.

After having explained in detail the historical evolution of *self* in its various grammatical roles, and having examined its usage in the last two centuries, I would like to tie up all the loose ends. Upon a micro-level observation of the word *self*, it displays a variety of meanings within a few grammatical roles. On one hand it can be a pronoun, an adjective and a noun. On the other hand, it can mean 'very', 'peculiar' or 'not blended colour'. Some other meanings might be 'personality', 'individual', 'identity' or 'soul'. On a macro-level observation, perhaps we have yet formed a current synonym to the word *self*, the way we read it today. I think that the next word inline to get tangled in the “self complexity” is the word *selfie*, and I am looking forward to read and write about it in the future.

Appendix A. is found in a separate file

Reference List

Brooks, Stoney. 2015. "Does personal social media usage affect efficiency and well-being?". *Computers in Human Behavior*. 46: 26–37.

Corpus of Contemporary American English. Accessed February 22, 2015.
<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>

Cupchik, C. Gerald. 2011. "The Digitized Self in the Internet Age". *Psychology of aesthetics, creativity, and the arts*. 5, (4): 318-328.

Disraeli, Benjamin, Earl of Beaconsfeild. 2012. *Vivian Grey*. New York: The Century Co.
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/9840/9840-h/9840-h.htm>

Luckhurst, Roger. 2006. *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online. 2015. Accessed March 15.

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/himself>

Oxford English Dictionary. 2015. "self, pron., adj., and n.". Accessed February 22.

<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.its.uu.se/view/Entry/175090?>

Parker, Eleanor. 2013. *A Clerk of Oxford*. The Anglo-Saxon O Antiphons: O Emmanuel, God mid us. Accessed March 23, 2015. <http://aclerkofoxford.blogspot.se/2013/12/the-anglo-saxon-o-antiphons-o-emmanuel.html>