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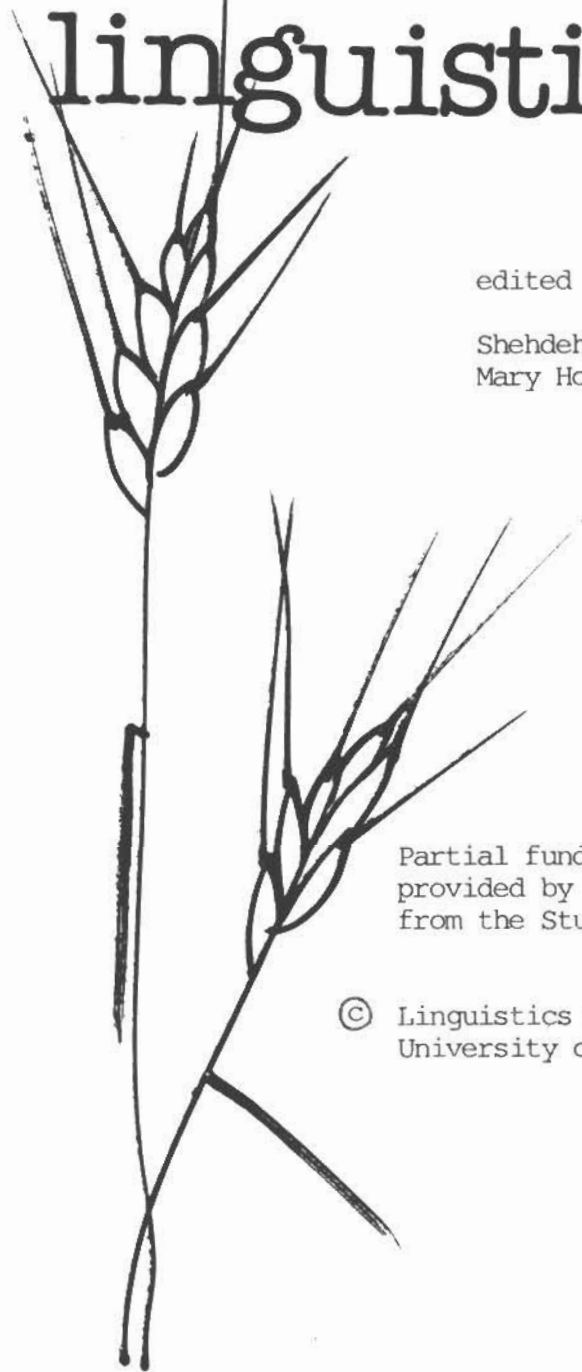
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Kansas Working Papers in Linguistics

Volume 11, 1986

<i>Julie Bruch</i>	Expressive Phonemes in Japanese	1
<i>Hiroshi Nara</i>	Approaches to Anaphora Resolution in a Natural Language Database Management System	9
<i>Elzbieta Moszczak</i>	Major Address Patterns in Polish and How They Compare with Major Address Patterns in English	27
<i>Shehdeh Fareh</i>	How Far Does the English Teachers' Pronunciation Affect that of Their Students in Jordanian Public Schools?	45
<i>Andrew Pawley</i>	On Speech Formulas and Linguistic Competence	57
<i>Natasha Beery</i>	I Can't Help Myself: A Lexicalized Expression Examined	89
<i>Mary Howe</i>	Conflicting Speech Formulas: About To and Not About To	101
Cumulative contents of Volumes 1-11		114

I CAN'T HELP MYSELF:
A Lexicalised Expression Examined

Natasha Beery

I returned from the stove with a panful of hash browns to find my breakfast plate empty and my housemate with a guilty expression on his lips.

"I couldn't help myself!" he pleaded, his blue eyes widening appealingly.

"You could so help yourself," I countered. "I divided that omelette in half so that for once I could get my fair share. The problem is that you could help yourself, and you did - to my half, too."

"It's not my fault," he maintained stubbornly, "You should have known better than to leave the table."

Thus ended another breakfast in a home where the motto was "Eat or be eaten." Though I left the table hungry, at least I'd had food for thought. Rather than wonder whether my housemate and I were meant for each other, like a true linguist I began to ponder the many uses of the verb help. It seems as though there are at least three main usages of help, two of which are exemplified in the preceding dialogue. The three occur in a minimal triplet, in which stress placement as well as context play a key role in disambiguation.

- (1) I can't help myself...only a therapist can help me.
- (2) I can't help myself...Susie has the serving spoon.
- (3) I can't help myself...I'm in love with the guy.

For future reference, we'll call them help-1, help-2, and help-3. The numbers should not be construed as representing any sort of precedence; they are simply used as referents. Help-1, 2, and 3 could also be thought of as help-aid, help-serve, and help-restrain, respectively.

A correlate to these varying senses of help is found in words which are derivationally related. In addition to the verb and noun help, most dictionaries list at least five derived words: helper, 'one who helps'; helpful, 'of help'; unhelpful, 'of no help'; helping, 'of help' (adj.) or 'serving' (n.); helpless, 'without help' or 'without inner resources'.

In addition to these five, one also often finds helpfully, helplessly, helpfulness, and so on. These words are all formed by regular morphological processes, but, as Pawley (1982) has pointed out, are included in dictionaries because they are recognized as



The expression 'I can't help myself', in its idiomatic usage, can be interpreted along lines proposed by Pawley (1982, 1983) as a lexicalised expression, one of the thousands that a speaker of a language must know in order to communicate with native-like fluency. Such collocations form a subset of the grammatical sentences of a language, a subset which most likely represents the mainstay of everyday communication. Though there is no sharp division to be drawn between idiomatic and nonidiomatic expressions, Pawley (1982) has outlined certain criteria which may indicate a lexicalised form. An idiosyncratic phrase structure, inseparability of certain constituents, transformational defectiveness, and formulaic usage are among the criteria which prove useful in the analysis of the phrase, 'I can't help myself'.

Grammar

The lexicalised expression 'comprises a semi-independent generative grammar' (Pawley 1982:22), with a nucleus consisting of a verb and its arguments, structural elements which, if obligatorily realized, are termed inflections, and if optional, constitute expansions. Together this structure constitutes the lexicalised sentence stem. At a first approximation, the expression could be formulated as follows:

NP Aux help NP

Inflections

NP: The two NP's must be coreferential, with the second being a pronominal reflexive; otherwise help-1 and help-2 senses obtain.¹

- (4) Jane can't help herself.
- * (5) Margaret Thatcher can't help the British Prime Minister.
- * (6) Demeter can't help Agatha.

A pronominal reflexive is not, however, sufficient to obtain help-3:

- * (7) Joe can't help himself to the kimchee.

Further, the NP must be animate, or anthropomorphized, or in some way have its volitionality called into question:

- (8) The rock couldn't help itself; it didn't mean to trip you.

Probably the most common form this expression takes is in the first person singular, as we are more often excusing our own behavior than that of others.

- (9) I can't help myself!

Aux: The modal can and its synonym, be able, appear to be obligatory for this expression. Any other modal calls up help-1

or help-2.

- *(10) I don't help myself.
- *(11) I won't help myself.
- *(12) I may not help myself.
- *(13) I might not help myself.
- *(14) I should not help myself.
- *(15) I had better not help myself.

However, other modals are allowed when can/be able is present.

- (16) I must not be able to help myself.
- (17) I might not be able to help myself.

Aspect is also restricted. The progressive doesn't work for help-3, but the perfective is permissible.

- *(18) I can't be helping myself.
- (19) I couldn't have helped myself.
- (20) I wouldn't have been able to help myself.

On the other hand, there seem to be no restrictions on tense. The past and present tenses may be more common in usage, as the formula is most often used to excuse a past or present action rather than to make a prediction of bad behavior in the future.

- (21) I can't help myself.
- (22) I couldn't help myself.
- (23) I won't be able to help myself.

By now the astute reader will have noticed that most of the example sentences are in the negative. Indeed, one of the striking features of this expression is that the unmarked instantiation is in the negative. The positive form, 'I can help myself,' is best understood as help-1 or help-2. It is possible to obtain a reading of help-3 only under certain conditions, i.e., as an echoing reply to the negative form:

- (24) Penelope can't help herself, poor dear.
- (25) Oh yes she can help herself, she just doesn't try.

(26) Oh, she can help herself, she just doesn't try.

Reply (25) places the stress on can in order to highlight disagreement. Stress placement in (26) echoes the stress of the negative statement. Another possibility, again only as an echo to a negative statement, would be to use an emphatic marker.

(27) She can too help herself.

(28) She can so help herself.

Taking into account the restrictions on the phrase marker, we may then restate the formula as:

NP_i can/be able (PERFECT) TENSE NEG help NP_i
 [+humanoid] [+refl]

Expansions There are many possibilities for expansion of the sentence stem, among them:

(29) I couldn't help myself at all.

(30) I couldn't help myself in the least.

(31) I can't help myself when it comes to {Arnold.
 eating berries.}

(32) I can't help myself from telling the truth.

Expressions of type (32) may be dialectal, and/or may be the result of a blend with the semantically similar expression 'I can't keep from doing something.

The expression 'I can't help myself' is internally expandable, demonstrating separability of constituents in some places. There are a number of internal expansions which do not disrupt the idiomaticity of the expression.

(33) I just can't help myself when it comes to gummi bears.

(34) I really can't help myself...

(35) I honestly can't help myself...

(36) I sometimes can't help myself...

(37) I often can't help myself...

(38) I normally can't help myself...

(39) I can't really help myself...

- (40) I can't seem to help myself...
- (41) I can't always help myself...
- (42) I can't help my-poor little-self...

However certain intrusions render a help-3 reading impossible:

- *(43) I can't just help myself...
- *(44) I can't help only myself...
- *(45) I can't help someone like myself...

It seems that help oneself is the most tightly bound sequence. Indeed in the modern term "self-help" we find the two as the basis for a derived term.

External Grammar

Conjunction and subordination are possible, with certain restrictions. Conjunctions external to the phrase are permissible, but VP deletion must be consonant with the idiomatic reading.

- (46) I couldn't help myself and didn't regret it.
- (47) I couldn't help myself and neither could Sandy.
- ?(48) I couldn't help myself and didn't try (to).

Subordination appears to be restricted to matrix sentences with verbs of believing and saying.

- (49) I wondered why I couldn't help myself.
- (50) Ernie believed that Nixon couldn't help himself.
- (51) Carlotta says she just can't help herself.
- (52) I guess Doug can't help himself.

Other matrix verbs suggest a reading of help-1 or help-2.

- *(53) I persuaded Angela not to help herself.
- ?(54) Deirdre forced Steve to be unable to help himself.

The subjunctive probably does permit a help-3 interpretation.

- (55) I wish I could help myself, but I can't keep from gambling on pork belly futures.

Transformations

In order to retain the idiomatic sense of being unable to restrain or control oneself, the expression permits only a few transformations.

- QUES (56) Can't you help yourself when it comes to Fred?
 WH-Q (57) Why can't I help myself when it comes to Mystic Mints?
 WH-Q (58) Who can help herself when it comes to ruggers?

Without the following phrase 'when it comes to...', the question may be understood as meaning help-1, but as previously noted, help-1 and help-3 are not semantically far apart.

The expression may also appear with nominalizations such as:

- (59) My not being able to help myself was my undoing.
 (60) An inability to help oneself is no excuse.

The passive transformation is not possible for help-3.

- *(61) I can't be helped (by myself).

Neither does this expression permit the various clefting and relativizing transformations:

- *(62) What I can't do is help myself.
 *(63) It's helping myself I can't do.
 *(64) Who I can't help is myself.
 *(65) It's myself that I can't help.

Moving along briskly, as my chemistry teacher used to say when he didn't want to dwell on a sticky subject, let us go on to consider what the expression means, and what we mean by the expression.

Meaning, Metaphor, and Speech Act Function

It might be argued that the 'literal' meaning of 'I can't help-3 myself' is 'I can't help-1 myself; I am of no help-1 to myself in resisting temptation.' There are a number of expressions in English (and other languages) which are similar in their semantics, syntax, and pragmatics.

- (66) I can't control myself.
 (67) I can't restrain myself.
 (68) I can't contain myself.

- (69) I can't prevent myself from doing something.
- (70) I can't keep from doing something.
- (71) I can't resist doing something.
- (72) I can't hold back (from doing something).
- (73) I can't avoid doing something.

Unlike the 'I can't help myself' expression, however, there is no idiomatic asymmetry between the positive and negative forms.

All of these expressions share a common metaphorical basis. The self is perceived as divided in two; there is a weaker inner self which is susceptible to forces in the outside world (the moon, temptation, peer pressure, etc.), and there is a protective controlling self which has some power to keep the inner self from running amuck. Other expressions which participate in this metaphorical construct are such as:

- (74) He got carried away.
- (75) She was beside herself with fear.
- (76) Harold didn't know what he was doing.
- (77) Phyllis was seized by a desperate longing.
- (78) Get a grip on yourself!
- (79) Pull yourself together!

We see here expressed an idea that one is not to be held strictly accountable for one's actions if outside pressures are overwhelming or inner resources for resistance insufficient. In extreme cases in this U.S. this is known as pleading not guilty by *reason of insanity*, and in the worst case, the 'Twinkie Defense'². However, to say 'I couldn't help it' is rarely sufficient, whether in a court of law or a kitchen, as in order to be exonerated one must not only have been under the influence of irresistible forces but also unable to distinguish right from wrong. This moral perspicuity is not implied by saying 'I couldn't help myself,' in fact, quite the contrary. At best this expression may serve as an explanation, but it isn't much of an excuse.

As an explanation, excuse, or implicit apology, 'I couldn't help myself' is uttered to refer to a variety of transgressions. It may apply to eating three ice cream sundaes, or burning one's syntax book, or dancing the watusi at a relative's funeral, or calling the Queen 'toots'. The expression is also commonly applied to a more socially acceptable form of behavior, that is, falling

in love. Again, the term 'falling in love' implies a loss of control over one's behavior. There are a number of popular songs which make use of the expression or a variant in their refrain:

(80) I can't help, falling in love, I can't help myself.

(81) The girl can't help it, she just can't help it.

(82) I can't help it if I'm still in love with you.

The frequent use of speech formulas in popular songs undoubtedly adds to the song's catchiness and, together with rhythm, rhyme and melody, enhances memorability.

The song excerpts include another expression which makes use of help-3, that is, 'I can't help it.' There are in fact several other collocations which are closely related. For the sake of brevity, these were not included in the body of this paper, but are here given in example sentences.

(83) I can't help it.

(84) I can't help it if..you don't believe me, she lies, etc.

(85) I can't help it that..you think Harvey's a duck.

(86) I can't help..believing that, wanting it, dancing, etc.

(87) I can't help..the ugly curtains, the state of the world.

(88) I can't help but..think, imagine, overhear, etc.

(89) I can't help that..you feel that way.

The family of expressions could perhaps be unified by a single unwieldy formula:

$$\text{NP}_i \text{ can't help } \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{NP}_i \text{ (from V-ing } \left(\left(\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{NP} \\ \text{that S} \end{array} \right\} \right) \right) \\ \text{it } \left(\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{that} \\ \text{if} \end{array} \right\} \text{ S} \right) \\ \text{that (S)} \\ \text{V-ing } \left(\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{that S} \\ \text{NP} \end{array} \right\} \right) \\ \text{NP}_j \end{array} \right\}$$

Each member of the family exhibits particular idiosyncracies. For example, 'NP can't help it' cannot be passivized unless the agent NP is 'no one', as:

- (90) Fred can't help it.
 *(91) It can't be helped by Fred.
 (92) No one can help it.
 (93) It can't be helped (by anyone).

In the case of 'NP_i can't help NP_j', which seems to contradict the phrase structure rule given previously, there are very special semantics attached to the second NP, which must be understood as meaning 'the way NP_j is'.

- (94) I can't help Ralph, that's just the way he is.
 (95) I can't help the ugly curtains, they came with the room.

In addition to the abovementioned formal idioms, there are a number of substantive idioms which employ help-1, help-2, or help-3.

- (96) Not if I can help it. (help-3)
 (97) So help me (God). (help-1?)
 (98) You're a big help. (help-1)
 (99) God help NP! (help-1)
 (100) Every little bit helps. (help-1)
 (101) Help yourself! (help-2)
 (102) God helps those who help themselves. (help-1)
 (103) I couldn't have done it without you (help-1)
 (104) There's no $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{help for} \\ \text{helping} \end{array} \right\}$ it. (help-3; = It can't be helped.)

Formula (102), while meant in the sense of help-1, is often punned upon in the sense of help-2 due to the association with (102); rapacious housemates delight in uttering phrase (102) while taking a second or third helping at the table.

Formula (103), which is used as an expression of gratitude, may be used in the positive in order to express quite the opposite.

- (105) I could have done without your help.

The usual instantiation, however, is in the negative. There are in fact a number of expressions in English which are similarly structured, making use of the modal can in the negative.

- (106) I couldn't have done it without you.
- (107) I can't (for the life of me) imagine...
- (108) I can't hear myself think.
- (109) NP can't take a joke.

Each of these substantive and formal idioms is worth a paper of its own. 'I can't help myself' is only one among innumerable expressions in English which can best be understood in terms of lexicalised sentence stems; partly or fully specified strings 'in the transitional zone between pure syntax and pure lexicon' (Pawley 1982:22). These constitute a crucial component of a linguistic repertoire, enabling a speaker to choose among the vast array of grammatical utterances to select those forms which are common and nativelike.

NOTES

1. The use of the asterix in this paper is meant to signify an otherwise grammatical sentence which cannot be understood in the sense of help-3.

2. The "Twinkie Defense" refers to a plea of diminished capacity entered in the case of the murder of the mayor and a city supervisor of San Francisco; the defendant's lawyer argued that his client's judgment was impaired by a diet of junk food.

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