

TRACING FORM AND FUNCTION IN THE HISTORY OF GERMAN INTENSIFIER *SELBST/SELBER*

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ABSTRACT This paper investigates the diachronic and synchronic distribution of the German reflexive intensifiers *selbst* and *selber*. While traditionally considered free variants, the two forms exhibit subtle differences not only in stylistic register, but also syntactic scope, and focus association. Based on historical corpora (including the edition of *Weistümer* by Jacob Grimm (1840–1869)) and texts by Martin Luther, Paul Jacob Marperger, and Jean Paul) and contemporary spoken data (a small podcast corpus featuring Anne Will), the study combines a qualitative approach with quantitative statistical methods. The results show that over time, the formal overabundance of *selbst* and *selber* developed into a functional distinction. Three historical stages can be identified: (1) a fully inflected intensifier (*selb*) in Old and Middle High German, (2) the emergence of invariant forms (*selbst*, *selber*) in Early New High German, and (3) a functional split in Modern German, whereby *selbst* is increasingly restricted to narrow syntactic scope and single-focus contexts. These findings support a syntactic reinterpretation of intensifier variation and contribute to broader debates on exaptation and grammatical differentiation.¹

1 FUNDAMENTALS AND CENTRAL QUESTIONS

This article deals with the reflexive intensifier *selbst/selber* in German. Following an introduction to the fundamentals and salient issues in this section, the

¹ I would like to express my particular gratitude to Helmut Weiß and his associates, Melanie Hobich and Farbod Khouzani. They facilitated the presentation of my preliminary, elementary concepts during their *Oberseminar*, and through a fruitful discussion, they contributed to the evolution of the initial ideas that culminated in this article. In addition, gratitude is extended to Johanna Hoppe, whose assistance in evaluating Jean Paul's correspondence and documenting missing geocoordinates for Grimm's *Weistümer*. In addition, Philipp Rauth is to be commended for his generous provision of some further geocoordinates for the *Weistümer*. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the reviewers for their insightful feedback, observations, and innovative concepts.

subsequent section 2 will examine diachrony to elucidate the genesis of the diverse forms of the intensifier in contemporary German. Finally, an examination will be conducted of the potential functions that may have emerged in section 3.

When we start with the situation in contemporary German, we find next to the standard written form *selbst* the form *selber*, which is commonly known as the colloquial secondary form (see Zifonun 2003: 89). The main question is: Where do these two forms come from and what influences the use of the forms? Do we find variation that is specific to (social) registers (cf. Siemund 2000: 10)?, is this a case of free variation (cf. Gast 2006: 70; Hole 2002: FN 1)? Or are there hidden functional differences that influence the choice of either? Thus the central question is whether the variation reflects an underlying process of systemic change — or whether we are instead dealing with genuine free variation, with no directional development toward functional specialization.

If *selber* is merely a variant form of *selbst*, we are dealing with a case of overabundance (Thornton 2011b,a, 2019). This term refers to the occurrence of two or more forms filling the same paradigm cell. Overabundance is often symptomatic of transitional stages in diachronic change, typically manifesting as horizontal (geolinguistic) or vertical (sociolinguistic) variation. However, there are also instances in which no ongoing differentiation takes place, and the paradigmatic situation of overabundance stabilizes as free variation within the system. With *selbst* and *selber* we have a very limited paradigm with only one cell but filled with two forms.

1.1 Syntactic typologies and the challenge of German

A syntactic typology has been established in the extensive literature on reflexive intensifiers which is also established for German (among others cf. Zifonun 2003: 27–32, 89–91; Siemund 2000: 4; Hole 2002; Edmondson & Plank 1978). However, we will see that this typology is not optimal for the situation in (present-day) German. This is because there are syntactically defined function types that are differentiated, but for German a pure syntactical analysis is not possible and semantic categories are used for typification (NB of syntactic types). Thus, for German, we have the adnominal use (1a) with a direct link to the noun itself. In German, you can say that this adnominal function goes hand in hand with a personal reading, i.e. an interpretation meaning ‘in person’, for example (1a). This distinguishes the adnominal intensifier from its adverbial readings (exclusive/inclusive) (1b) and (1c). In the adverbial (or sometimes adverbial) use, it is assumed that the intensifier is first integrated into a VP and then uses this VP to focus on a superordinate

NP. With the adverbial use we have two different semantic variants: For one as in (1b) with an exclusive reading ‘Sophie drinks the coffee alone (without help)’ and with an inclusive reading (1c) ‘Sophie also drinks coffee’.

A third use of reflexive *selbst/selber* which is not actually a use as an intensifier, but is nevertheless important to mention here, is its use as a focus particle (1d). As such *selbst* is always pre-focal with a scaling effect and what is most important here: only *selbst* grammaticalized as a focus particle, while *selber* could not be used as such.²

(1) a) *adnominal* ‘personal’

(*Tom mag Tee.*) *Sophie selbst/selber trinkt Kaffee.*
 (Tom likes tea.) Sophie INT drinks coffee.
 ‘(Tom likes tea.) Sophie herself drinks coffee.’

b) *adverbial (exklusive)* ‘alone, only’

(*Sophie hat für Tom eine Kanne Kaffee gemacht, aber*
 (Sophie made Tom a pot of coffee, but he
der mag keinen.) *Sophie trinkt den Kaffee selbst/selber.*
 doesn’t like it.) Sophie drinks the coffee INT.
 ‘(Sophie made Tom a pot of coffee, but he doesn’t like it.)
 Sophie drinks the coffee herself.’

c) *adverbial (inklusive)* ‘as well, also’

(*Tom liebt Kaffee.*) *Sophie ist selbst/selber Kaffeetrinkerin.*
 (Tom loves coffee.) Sophie is INT coffee-drinker

‘(Tom loves coffee.) Sophie is herself a coffee drinker.’

d) *Focus particle* ‘even’

(*Die ganze Familie liebt Kaffee.*) *Selbst/*Selber die*
 (The whole family loves coffee.) Even/*Self the
Großmutter.
 grandmother.
 ‘(The whole family loves coffee.) Even/*(Her)Self the
 grandmother.’

² Only in the letters by Jean Paul, there is little evidence for *selber* being used as focus particle (one document out of 100 contexts with *selber*): *selber der Fürst sagt, sie liebe weder Kinder noch Hunde* ‘even the duke says she loves neither children nor dogs’ (Jean Paul to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi Koburg, 8. Sept. 1803). Pittner (2010) already points out an unusual/creative use of *selber* by Jean Paul.

A shortcoming of this syntactic typology is that not all attested readings are covered: for instance, a dynamic-modal interpretation (*Er fährt das Auto selbst/selber* ‘he is able to drive the car’) is not usually listed in these accounts.³ It is evident that a significant challenge inherent to these types of syntactic functions is the frequent reliance on semantic interpretation for their classification in German, i.e. the readings that emerge from the syntactic configuration. Although the examples discussed for illustration in (1) are, of course, idealized, in many real-world cases it is difficult to determine whether a given instance is adnominal or adverbial. As for example in (2): Here, in addition to the adnominal reading (‘We, the women personally’), the exclusive adverbial reading (‘We, the women alone’) would also be possible.

- (2) *das können wir die Frauen selbst in die Hand nehmen,*
 that can we the women INT into the hand take,
(und die Männer, die sind dazu nicht geeignet.)
 (and the men they are for-that not suitable)
 ‘We women [ourselves] can take that into our own hands
 [ourselves], (and the men – they are not suited for it.)’
 (Angela Merkel in the Podcast „Politik mit Anne Will“, 26.
 November 2024)

This ambiguity is especially true when verbal semantics comes into play, which further complicates the analysis. Moreover, the readings themselves are often less clear-cut than one might assume. In other words, there exists a considerable degree of ambiguity in the current usage. This general issue with the established function types for (standard) German becomes particularly relevant in empirical analysis. Toward the end of this paper, I will propose an alternative approach to distinguishing adnominal and adverbial uses, one that does not rely on potentially ambiguous interpretations in the intensification of reflexive expressions.

In spoken language, such ambiguities are often resolved by prosodic means – not only stress, but also pauses and intonation can disambiguate between an adnominal and an adverbial reading. Although prosody cannot be systematically analyzed in the historical written data used in the following, it should be acknowledged as an integral factor.

Despite the ambiguous reading, the four functional types of *selb-* are already attested in Old High German (Lühr 2010), suggesting that there has been no major structural change in the course of the language’s history in this respect. However, in terms of form, there is an observation made by Edmondson & Plank (1978: 388): they report incidentally that some speakers tend to

³ I thank one of the reviewers for pointing me to this important observation.

avoid *selber* in adnominal contexts. If this were the case, we would witness a formal resolution of the ambiguity between adnominal and adverbial uses. That is, *selbst* would be reserved for adnominal readings, while *selber* would mark adverbial uses, as illustrated in (3).

- (3) a) *Sie trinkt selbst Kaffee.*
 she drinks INT.ADN/(ADV) coffee
 'She herself drinks coffee.'
- b) *Sie trinkt selber Kaffee.*
 she drinks INT.ADV coffee
 'She drinks the coffee herself.'

Such a system would not be unusual cross-linguistically. Japanese (4), for instance, makes the distinction between adverbial and adnominal uses on a formal level, and English (5) exhibits a much clearer syntactic differentiation between those two than German does.

- (4) a) *Taro-wa jibun-de kuruma-wo aratta.*
 Taro-NOM self.ADV-INSTR Auto-AKK wusch
 'Taro wusch das Auto selbst.'
- b) *Taro jishin kyouju-wo sonkeishiteiru.*
 Taro self.ADN Professor-AKK ehrt
 'Taro selbst ehrt den Professor.'

(Ogawa 1998: 165–173)

- (5) a) *Sophie drinks the coffee herself*
 Sophie drinks the coffee herself.ADV
 'Sophie drinks the coffee herself.'
- b) *Sophie herself drinks the coffee*
 Sophie herself.ADN drinks the coffee
 'Sophie herself drinks the coffee.'

In light of the statement by Edmondson & Plank (1978: 388), the question arises whether German might be developing — or may have already developed — a similar kind of system that formally distinguishes between adnominal and adverbial uses. Could it be that the overabundance (Thornton 2011b,a, 2019) of forms (*selbst* and *selber*) in the system leads to a functional differentiation, possibly in the sense of an exaptation (Lass 1990) — a refunctionalization of existing variation into a new grammatical distinction?

A central question in the study of intensifiers such as *selbst* and *selber* is how formal variation and functional differentiation interact over time. In the literature on language change, two concepts are particularly relevant: grammaticalization and exaptation. Section 4 will provide a detailed discussion on the interaction between the two.

1.2 Preliminary work

In the context of New High German, it is imperative to acknowledge the prevailing consensus that *selber* is regarded as a colloquial variant of *selbst* (see section 2.4). This perception poses a particular challenge when examining the existing literature on intensifiers. As Pittner (2010) notes, *selber* tends to occupy a marginal position: it is often viewed as informal or non-standard and is frequently relegated to footnotes in grammatical descriptions, mentioned merely as a colloquial counterpart to *selbst*:

„SELBER wird von einigen Sprecher/innen eher als umgangssprachlich empfunden. Auch sein Schattendasein in grammatischen Beschreibungen ist wohl dieser Einschätzung geschuldet, die in SELBER eine umgangssprachliche Variante von SELBST sieht.“

‘SELBER is perceived by some speakers as more colloquial. Its shadowy existence in grammatical descriptions is probably also due to this assessment, which sees SELBER as a colloquial variant of SELBST.’ (Pittner 2010: 3)

As a result, there has been little systematic inquiry into whether *selbst* and *selber* differ functionally. Apart from Pittner’s contribution and the brief remark by Edmondson & Plank (1978: 388), few scholars have addressed the possibility that the two forms might not be interchangeable in all contexts.

Schäfer (2025) conducted an online survey that examined, among other things, speakers’ register awareness concerning the forms *selbst* and *selber*. The results show that *selbst* is perceived as the standard variant, whereas *selber* is evaluated as substandard. It is particularly interesting to note that there are no regional patterns in contemporary German: both forms are judged positively or negatively across all areas. This finding suggests a considerable degree of idiolectal fluctuation in speakers’ evaluations. It is noteworthy that in the late 19th century, a discernible spatial pattern in the dialects with regard to the variants was evident: while *selber* (and variations of it) were more common in the Upper German area, *selbst* is mainly common in West Central German and Low German (cf. Schäfer 2025; see also below figure 3). Schäfer

2025 shows, there is now no geographical preference for one form or the other in contemporary standard German anymore. Thus, standardization and its nativization (cf. Pröll 2021) has eliminated this difference and it has not penetrated the modern regional languages; instead, both main forms have entered the standard and colloquial registers.

1.3 *Research question and methodological scope*

The system of reflexive intensification has undergone a number of processes of change in both the recent and older history of the German language. Whilst Schäfer (2025) concentrate on sociolinguistic patterns and the methodological question of how ambiguous structures can be recorded and analysed in text corpora or speaker surveys, the principal aim of this paper is to illuminate these processes of language change. In order to achieve this objective, it is necessary to direct our attention to the historical developments of the two forms, and to pose the following question: how did *selbst* and *selber* come to coexist in today's New High German? After that we will take a closer look at the functions that interact with these forms.

This study combines diachronic and synchronic data to investigate the distribution, usage, and functional differentiation of the German intensifiers *selbst* and *selber*. Rather than focusing exclusively on formal variation, the analysis aims to uncover systematic correlations between form, function, and syntactic context. The investigation is based on a combination of historical and contemporary sources.

Let us begin with a look at the formal developments of the intensifier in the linguistic history of German, before we turn to the possible development(s) and change(s) of its function(s).

2 FORMS OF THE INTENSIFIER

2.1 *Historical developments from Indo-European to Old High German*

To understand the origins of reflexive intensifiers in German, we need to go back to Proto-Germanic, which inherited a strategy for reflexivization from Indo-European — namely, the use of **s(w)e* elements, as still attested in many contemporary Indo-European languages. Proto-Germanic **sek*, **seke* (Pron., Reflex.-Pron.) developed a reflexive pronoun from this Indo-European root. However, in most Germanic languages, this reflexive pronoun did not survive as a distinct form and eventually collapsed. In Old English, Old Frisian, and (presumably) Old Saxon, reflexive pronouns disappeared entirely. In the Old Norse languages, the reflexive system was restructured into a middle or

passive voice marker (Ottósson 2013; Hermodsson 1952). Old High German is a noteworthy exception: here, the reflexive pronoun *sih* is still attested in the third person singular and plural accusative. It is important to highlight that this system was limited to the accusative for a rather long time. The extension of the reflexive pronoun *sich* to the dative did not occur until the Late Early New High German period;⁴ We will come back to this later (see below p. 18).

In addition to the reflexive pronoun, the Germanic languages also developed an intensifier germ. **selba* from the same Indo-European root. This resulted in a pronominal or adjectival form, inflected accordingly, which in Old High German appears postnominally and occurs in both weak and strong inflectional paradigms. Unlike the reflexive pronoun the intensifier is still present in all Germanic languages today and in some cases, as in English, the intensifier fills the gap of the missing reflexive pronoun (with the exception of the middle voice and the anti-causative, which are both unmarked in English).

In Old High German, the intensifier *selb* shows both strong and weak inflection, as illustrated in the examples from the *Referenzkorpus Altdeutsch* in table 1. For the present discussion, it is particularly the strong inflection that is of interest. The weak inflected forms followed their own developmental path, as discussed in detail by Kempf (2023) especially for the (Early) New High German period. However, for understanding the function and persistence of the intensifier in later stages of German, the strong paradigm is most relevant.

If we remain on the formal side for a moment and ask where our present-day forms *selbst* and *selber* originate, we find that *selber* can be derived quite directly: it corresponds to the nominative masculine form of the Old High German paradigm in table 1. In contrast, *selbst* is not directly attested in Old High German. However, the genitive masculine/neuter form *selbes* is documented, and is assumed to be the morphological source of *selbst*: The prevailing hypothesis is that *selbst* arose through *-t*-epithesis, which likely occurred during the Early New High German period, by the addition of a segment to the genitive form *selbes* (cf. Grimm 1837: vol. 16, cols. 429 and 456; Schuhmacher 1973; Lühr 2010).

⁴ I suggest, that this spread to the dative was probably due to the influence of people from the Low German region who switched to High German and brought the Low German system of a *Objektkasus* (object case), which does not distinguish between the accusative and dative, into their High German. However, future studies still need to verify this hypothesis.

	strong	weak
Singular		
Nominative		
masc.	selber (selb) [18]	(der) selbo [303]
neut.	selbaz [4]	(daz) selba (selbi) [19]
fem.	selbiu [14]	(diu) selba [33]
Accusative		
masc.	selban (selben) [39]	(dën) selbun (selbon, selben) [81]
neut.	selbaz (selbez, selbiz) [8]	(daz) selba [38]
fem.	selba [2]	(dia) selbun [33]
Dative		
masc.	selbemo (selbemu) [78]	(demu) selbin (selbon, selben) [36]
neut.	selbemo [5]	(demu) selben, selbin [17]
fem.	selbero (selber) [7]	(deru) selbun [44]
Genitive		
masc.	selbes [152]	(des) selben (selbin) [44]
neut.	selbes (selbis) [13]	(des) selben (selbin) [18]
fem.	selbero (selbera) [10]	(dera) selbun [22]
Instrumental	–	–
Plural		
Nominative		
masc.	selbe [3]	(de) selbun (selbon, selben) [46]
neut.	–	(diu) selbun [6]
fem.	selben, selue [2]	(dio) selbun (selben) [17]
Accusative		
masc.	selben [1]	(de) selbun (selbon, selben) [19]
neut.	–	(de) selbun (selbon) [11]
fem.	–	(dio) selbun (selben) [11]
Dative		
masc.	selben (selbem) [23]	(dem) selbon (selben) [16]
neut.	selben [7]	(dem) selbon [3]
fem.	selben (selbem) [5]	(dem) selben [3]
Genitive		
masc.	selbero [5]	(deru) selbon [1]
neut.	selbero [2]	(deru) selbon [3]
fem.	–	(dera) selbono (selbun, selbon) [8]
Instrumental	–	–

Table 1

OHG *selb* (singular) in the Old German reference corpus (ReA, <https://www.deutschdiachrondigital.de/rea/>, February 3, 2026; numbers in brackets indicate the absolute frequencies)

2.2 From inflection to frozen forms

In order to understand the contemporary situation of German, the question arises when and how the Old High German system of the strong/weak inflected *selb* collapsed. It is already in Old High German that we find frozen, uninflected forms, as shown by Lühr (2010: 104) with examples from Otfrid. The tendency toward morphologically unmotivated or fixed forms increases noticeably in Middle High German, likely influenced by general phonological processes such as the weakening of unstressed syllables. Quantitative evidence—although based on a limited corpus—indicates that around 16% of the attestations in the Middle High German reference corpus (ReM, <https://www.linguistics.rub.de/rem/>, February 3, 2026) already involve *selb* in frozen, non-inflected form. This suggests a broader trend: Starting in Old High German and gaining momentum in Middle and Early New High German, the system undergoes a process of deflection. By this I mean the morphological erosion of the original inflectional paradigm of *selb*, which in earlier stages still displayed full agreement in case, gender, and number (cf. Norde 2020, 2009). As endings were gradually eroded (e.g. through the weakening of unstressed syllables in MHG), the system lost transparency and left behind frozen, invariant forms. This morphological reduction paved the way for a functional reanalysis, which can also be interpreted as a shift in word class – from a fully inflected pronominal/adjectival form to invariant intensifying particles such as *selbst* and *selber*.

Table 2 provides an overview of the competing frozen forms attested from Early New High German to New High German. During this transitional period, multiple non-inflected variants are in use side by side. These include the uninflected form *selb*, the nominative masculine form *selber*, and the genitive-based form *selbs*, which already appears in fossilized usage as early as the 14th century. According to data from the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (DWB), the collection of German reference corpora *Deutsch Diachron Digital* (DDD), and the *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (DWDS), *selb(e)st* appears toward the end of the 15th century, especially in East Central German. Another form *selb(e)sten* emerges from the mid-15th century onward and remains in use until approximately the 17th century. Its exact origin is unclear, but it may represent a historical superlative, or emphatic variant.⁵ However, it plays only a very minor and short-lived role in the history of German.

To gain a more fine-grained understanding of this transitional period — from Middle High German to Early New High German — within a clearly defined regional context, I have examined the phenomenon in a specific genre:

⁵ This idea is going back to Jacob Grimm who assumes an analogy to Greek and Romance languages (Grimm 1837: vol. 16, cols. 429 and 456).

form	derivation	first attested
<i>selb</i>	inflectionless base form	DDD: OHG (Otfrid, 9th century Lühr 2010)
<i>selber</i>	< OHG Nom. masc. strong	DDD: OHG
<i>selbs</i>	< OHG Gen. masc./neut. strong <i>selbes</i>	DDD/DWDS: early 14th century (esp. East Upper German, West Upper German, West Middle German)
<i>selbst</i>	< OHG Gen. masc./neut. strong <i>selbes</i> + <i>t</i> -epithesis	DDD/DWDS/DWB: from late 15th century (esp. East Central German, East Franconian, West Upper German)
<i>selb(e)sten</i>	not clear; J. Grimm (DWB): superlative form <i>selbst</i> > <i>selbsten</i> (Analogy to Greek and Romance languages)	DDD/DWDS: Mid 15th century (esp. East Upper German; from 17th century West Middle German)

Table 2

Competing frozen forms from ENHG to NHG (based on DWB [Grimm 1837](#): vol. 16, cols. 429 and 456; DWDS www.dwds.de; DDD www.deutschdiachrondigital.de, February 3, 2026)

the so-called *Weistümer*, rural customary law. These texts are particularly well suited for this type of investigation, as they represent a relatively homogeneous genre, are clearly anchored in local contexts, and span a wide chronological range that includes the period of interest, meaning the time between late MHG to early NHG (cf. [Werkmüller 1972](#); [Bertelsmeier-Kierst 2008](#); [Schmidt-Wiegand 1986](#); for similar English law traditions see [Liberman Cuenca 2025](#)).

2.3 Evidence from rural customary law (*Weistümer*)

What exactly constitutes the text type *Weistum* is controversial in legal history studies.⁶ These texts are representative of customary laws, which are typically transmitted through both formal and informal oral means, and which are mostly concerned with local legal traditions and communal practices, as

⁶ These local court assemblies are also referred to by regionally varying terms such as *Bann-/Ehaft (taiding)*, *Dinghofrodel*, *Rodel*, *Willkür*, or *Offnung*

they pertain to rural communities. Fortunately, a large corpus of these texts was edited in the 19th century by Jacob Grimm (1840–1869) as a six-volume collection.⁷ Even if his collection is not exhaustive and there are now many more editions of the *Weistümer* for Austria and Switzerland, for example, the present study is limited to the edition by Jacob Grimm.

The great advantage of Jacob Grimm’s *Weistum* collection is that it covers an important period of time that is poorly covered by Korpra, covering a relatively large part of the Middle and Upper German language area including some low German regions and at the same time reflecting regional writing varieties⁸ that are characterized by their proximity to orality.

To provide an initial overview of the data, let us take a look at the overall frequency of intensifier attestations in the *Weistümer* corpus. According to Werkmüller (1972), the six volumes edited by Jakob Grimm contain a total of 1,530 *Weistümer*. Out of these, I identified 785 cases of the intensifying element (*selb/selber/selb(e)st*) in 496 texts.

In most cases, only a single form is attested per document, which limits the possibility of drawing conclusions about functional contrast. However, the data does provide robust insights into the formal distribution of these variants over time.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of *Weistümer* containing an intensifier across time. As can be seen, the bulk of attestations clusters between the mid-14th and the mid-16th century. Before and after this period, the frequency drops significantly. In general, this picture also corresponds to the general chronological distribution of customary law texts in the Grimm corpus (cf. Werkmüller 1972: 181). There are also 78 *Weistümer* in the corpus for which no reliable date could be assigned.

Let us now turn to the actual forms of the intensifier attested in the corpus. The data in figure 2 illustrates a diachronic trend: one form decreases in frequency over time, while another gains ground. The declining form is *selber*, whereas *selbst* shows a steady increase. In between, we find a set of transitional or competing variants—most notably *selb* and *selbes*—which can be interpreted either as independent forms or as morphological precursors

⁷ The edition was published by Jacob Grimm between 1840 and (posthumously) 1869; the index volume (volume 7) was later compiled and published by Richard Schröder (1878).

⁸ Unfortunately, Jacob Grimm’s editorial interventions have not yet been reviewed. A comparison of the edition with the original documents has not been possible, due to the presumptive loss of these documents, or their storage in archives which are difficult to access. It can be said that Jacob Grimm normalized the spelling, particularly with regard to the use of punctuation marks and the application of upper and lower case letters. It can be hypothesised that he retained grammatical and lexical structures. In the first volume, in particular, the presence of footnotes elucidating specific linguistic peculiarities of a text is evident, yet these are not corrected within the text itself.

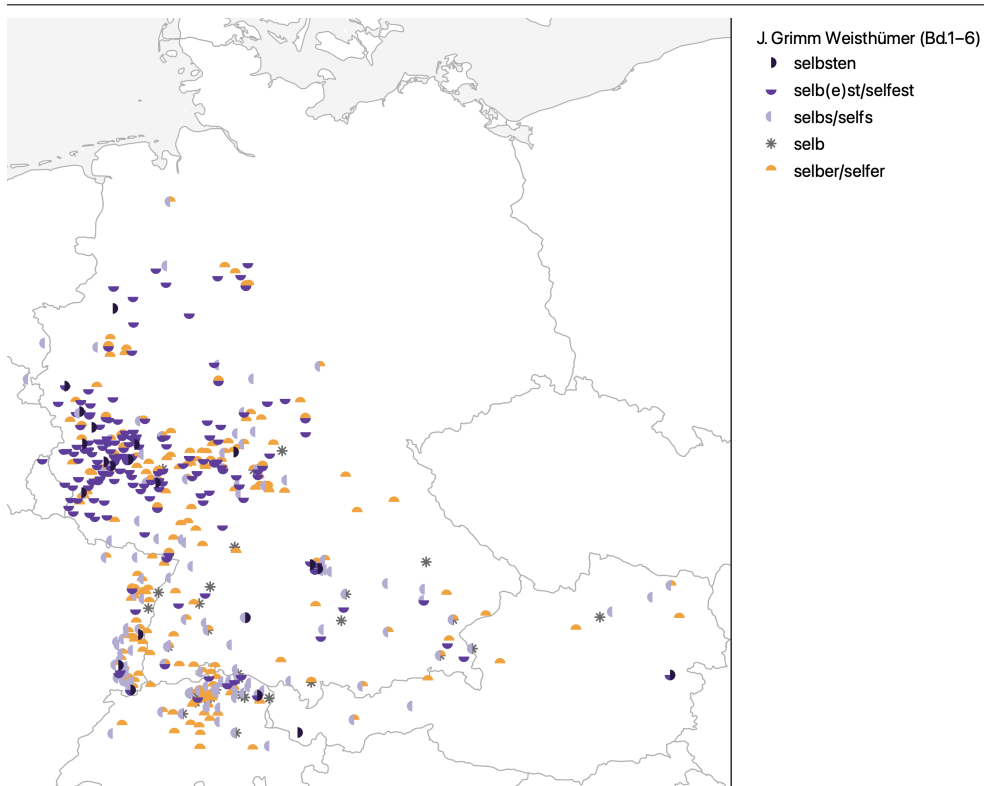


Figure 1 *Weistümer* with reflexive intensifiers in J. Grimm (1840–1869)
(more than one form per Weistum possible)

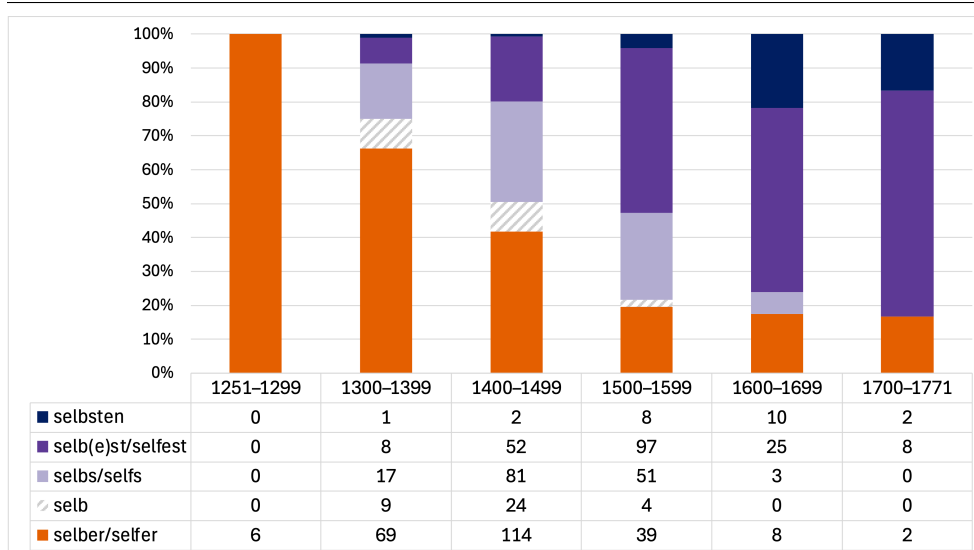


Figure 2 Forms for the reflexive intensifier in J. Grimm (1840–1869)

to *selbst*. These variants are relatively common during the transition period but disappear almost entirely by the 17th century. The form *selbsten* appears briefly in the same period but vanishes again by the 18th century.

What is also noteworthy is that *selber* does not disappear entirely. Although its usage declines significantly, the form remains in the language—persisting to this day as a colloquial and geographically non-specific variant that is still widely understood and used.

At this point, we may turn to the geographical distribution of the forms in figure 3. This map shows all attestations of reflexive intensifiers across the Weistümer corpus, aggregated across the entire time span from the 13th to the 18th century. The spatial distribution reflects both the availability of sources and historical usage patterns. Most Weistümer in the dataset originate from the West Central German area, including Alsace and Switzerland, but there are also numerous texts from the middle Central German region, as well as a few from the Low German and East Upper German areas.

A closer look reveals that *selbst* shows a strong presence in the West Central German area, especially in early attestations. From there, it appears to have spread geographically. This finding contradicts the claim found in the *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, which attributes the origin of *selbst* to the East Central German region (cf. Grimm 1837: vol. 16, cols. 429 and 456). In contrast, *selber*

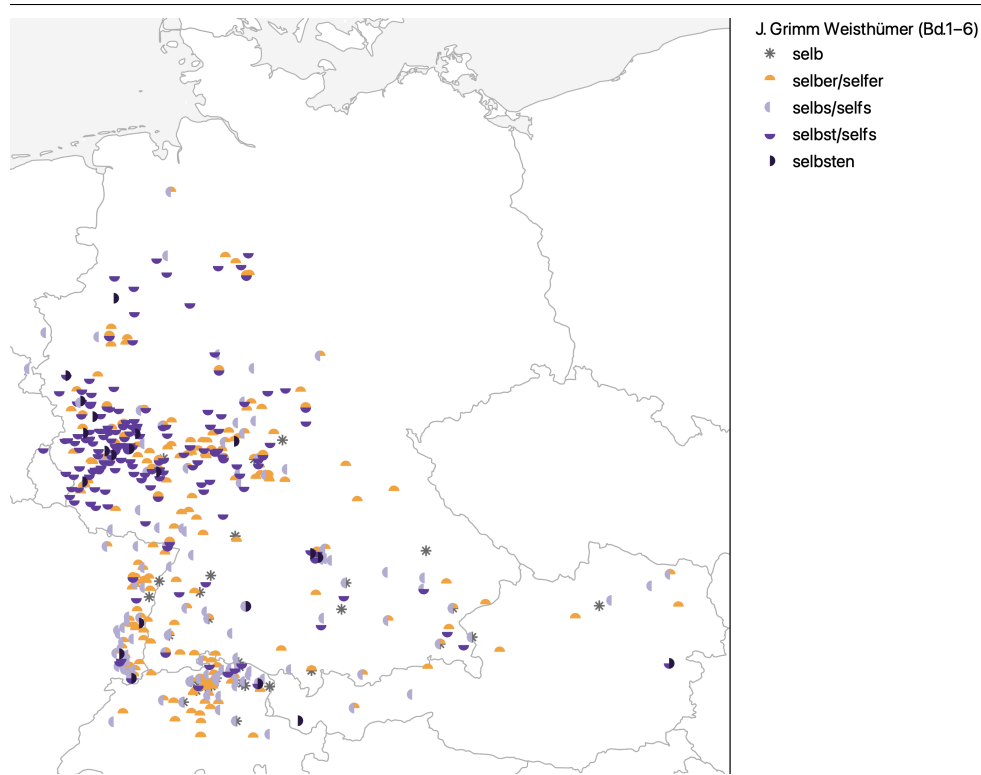


Figure 3 Map of the forms for the reflexive intensifier in den Weistümern 1251–1771 (J. Grimm 1840–1869)

remains in use longer in Upper German varieties, particularly in the southwest. Diachronically, we can therefore trace a west-to-east spread of *selbst*, beginning in the West Central German area during the Late Middle Ages.

It is evident that the form *selbst* originates in the West Central German area and is attested not from the 15th century, as previously assumed (see table 2), but already in the 14th century. This marks the beginning of a second stage in the development of intensifiers, in which multiple forms coexist—much like the situation we find in Luther’s final version of his Bible translation:

- (6) *Vnd Gott hatte sie selbs gemacht / vnd selber die schrift*
 and God has them INT made / and INT the writing
drein gegraben.
 into dug.

'And God himself had made them (the tables), and himself had engraved the writing on them.' (Luther Bible, final edition: Exodus 32:16)

Here, both forms appear side by side; the older variant *selb* clearly persists and coexists with the newer form *selber*, without being replaced. This situation mirrors the stated contemporary usage as a presumably free variation.

Beyond the attested textual evidence, it is also instructive to consider how normative grammar writing has positioned the forms *selbst* and *selber*. Prescriptive evaluations not only reflect usage but can actively shape and reinforce language change. The following subsection therefore turns to normative perspectives.

2.4 Normative perspectives on *selbst* and *selber*

An additional factor in the diachronic trajectory of the intensifiers is their treatment in the normative grammars and their impact on standard German(s). Grammarians of the 17th and 18th centuries did not categorically reject *selber*, but tended to present it as a secondary or marked variant alongside *selbst*. Schottelius (1663: 534, 544, 733) and Bödiker (1746: 72f) still list *selber* and *selbesten* as side forms to *selbst*. Gottsched (1752: 278) likewise discusses the forms *selbst* – *selber* – *selbesten*, though he explicitly criticizes expressions such as *meiner/deiner/seiner selber* as ill-formed and recommends *unser selbst* / *selbesten* for the plural. Adelung (1780: 240) is more restrictive, explicitly preferring *selbst* over *selber* or *selbesten*, although he does note distributional differences: *selber* typically occurs in post-nominal position (*ich selber*), whereas *selbst* may appear both pre- and post-nominally:

„Hinten stehen selber, allein und die Umstandswörter des Ortes [...] *Ich selber, wir allein* [...] Sowohl vornen als auch hinten können stehen: *genug, mehr, selbst, ...*“

'At the end stand *selber, allein* ('alone') and the circumstantial words of place [...] *Ich selbst, wir allein* [...] Both at the front and at the end can stand: *genug* ('enough'), *mehr* ('more'), *selbst, ...*' (Adelung 1780: 512f)

In the 19th century, prescriptive discourse increasingly indexicalized *selber* as colloquial. Becker already remarks that *selber* occurs in the „*Volksprache*“ ('colloquial') alongside *selbst* (Becker 1829: vol. 2, §147). This evaluation persisted into modern usage guides. For example, Bastian Sick's widely read normative column „*Zwiebelfisch*“ in the magazine *Der Spiegel* (2003–2012)

explicitly contrasts *selbst* as the standard form with *selber* as colloquial: „Im zwanglosen Gespräch ist *selber* genauso gut wie *selbst*, im geschriebenen Deutsch hingegen ist *selbst* die bessere Wahl“ ‘In casual conversation, *selber* is just as good as *selbst*, but in written German, *selbst* is the better choice.’ (Sick 2004).

This normative perspective shows that the differentiation between the two forms is not only rooted in diachronic grammatical developments but also actively shaped and reinforced by prescriptive grammarians and language ideology. The diachronic trajectory of *selbst* and *selber* is therefore intertwined with processes of codification and standardization.⁹

However, even Bastian Sick’s magazine column from the early 2000s is indicative of the prevailing normative perspective of the 20th century. Moreover, the situation in contemporary German at the beginning of the 21st century is of particular interest.

This normative perspective is also closely linked to the medial asymmetry of the two forms. The spread of *selbst* is primarily a phenomenon of written language, where it gradually and only slowly established itself as the standard form of 20th century German. In oral usage, by contrast, *selber* has remained robust, especially in spoken (colloquial and dialectal) language. But when the written norm fed back into spoken usage and the other way around in the course of the naturalization of German standard language (cf. Pröll 2021) did the opposition between *selbst* and *selber* become real free variants in nativized standard German (cf. Schäfer 2025).

However, it should be emphasised that even in earlier stages of the German language, forms of the intensifier have been observed to coexist, as the data in the following sections will demonstrate. The nativization of the standard is but one of several key developments that may have acted as a catalyst for a possible functionalisation of the formal overabundance.

At this point, we have thus accounted for the diachronic co-occurrence of these two forms. What remains to be clarified, however, are the functions of the intensifier and whether there is any interaction between form and function. The following section turns to precisely this question. Whereas Section 2 traced the formal history of the variants, Section 3 investigates their *functions*.

⁹ This evaluation resonates with more recent observations such as those by Pittner (2010: 3), who notes that *selber* continues to be perceived as colloquial and often occupies a marginal position in grammatical descriptions, relegated to footnotes as a mere counterpart to *selbst*. In this sense, the normative codification from the 17th century onwards not only reflected but also anticipated the marginalization of *selber* in present-day linguistic discourse.

3 FUNCTIONS OF THE INTENSIFIER

In this section, the potential functions that may have developed over time will be examined. The investigation addresses the central question of whether there is any interaction between the form and function of the German intensifier. The present study commences with an examination of its role in reflexivity and disambiguation in earlier stages of the language (Section 3.1). The subsequent sections (3.2 and 3.3) address the potential functional differentiation between *selbst* and *selber* in NHG.

3.1 Reflexivity and disambiguation in older language stages

It is important to recognize that the intensifier serves several distinct functions. On a basic level, it can simply reinforce the reflexivity of an action—particularly in cases where reflexive readings are infrequent or marked. In such cases, the notion of *other-directed* versus *non-other-directed* actions becomes relevant (Siemund & König 2000): intensifiers tend to be more frequent with other-directed actions to emphasize that the agent and the patient are, in fact, the same. This is logical in a certain sense: usually one kills others and not oneself – or vice versa: one usually washes oneself and not others; accordingly, the atypical reflexive use of a verb must be emphasized (intensified), for which there are different means in the languages of the world. One function of the intensifier in German in general is to emphasize reflexivity in such atypical reflexive contexts. The intensifier thus helps disambiguate between typically reflexive and atypically reflexive contexts. But this is the general pragmatic function of the intensifier and does not depend on the respective form (whether *selbst* or *selber*).

One other crucial function of the intensifier, especially in earlier historical stages, is its role as a *disambiguator*. As mentioned earlier, Old High German preserves the reflexive pronoun only in the third person accusative. In cases such as (7 a), reflexivity is morphologically marked; but in the dative like example (7 b) no such reflexive form exists. Instead, we find a personal pronoun, just as in all other persons and numbers — and, in fact, as in most Germanic languages, which lack a dedicated reflexive pronoun system altogether. This leads to a situation in which speakers must find ways to explicitly signal reflexivity where it would otherwise be ambiguous. The intensifier thus serves as a strategic means of clarification.

- (7) a) *allero mannoihh scal sih pidenchen*
 each men should PRON.3SG.REFL.MASC.ACC consider
 'Every person should think about'

(Freisinger Paternoster, early 9th century)

b) *ther bidit imo selbemo thanne ubiles*
 he asks PRON.3SG.NEUT.DAT INT.NEUT.DAT.SG then evil
 'He then asks evil of himself.'

(Weissenburger Katechismus, late 8th century)

In such cases, the intensifier becomes important in order to establish a reflexive reading. This is precisely what happens in example (7 b). The same structural principle underlies reflexivization strategies in English and Frisian: forms like *himself* or *herself* are functionally equivalent to the Old High German *imo selbemo*.

This pattern is also supported by corpus data. A glance at the overall distribution in the Old High German reference corpus (ReA, see table 1) reveals that the frequency of intensifiers is significantly higher in the dative and genitive cases than in the accusative. The difference is even more pronounced in the plural, where (strong inflected) intensifiers appear particularly often in the dative.¹⁰ This suggests that intensifiers played a crucial role in disambiguating reflexive constructions, especially in cases where no morphological reflexive pronoun was available.

The disproportionately frequent use of the intensifier with the dative has already been discussed in the reference grammars of Middle High German (Wegera, Klein, Solms, Barteld, Kwekkeboom & Waldenberger 2018: 402–407) and Early New High German (Ebert, Reichmann, Solms & Wegera 1993: 215). It is also observable in the *Lutherbibel letzter Hand* 1545, where reflexive pronouns in the dative are still absent. One example is given in (8). Here again, the intensifier compensates for the absence of a reflexive form in the dative. In short, the dative is clearly overrepresented in the distribution of intensifiers, in contrast to the accusative, where I have found only three attestations in total.

(8) *Denn die Erde bringet von jr selbs zum ersten das Gras.*
 for the earth brings from her self first the grass
 'For the earth brings of itself first the grass.'

(Lutherbibel letzter Hand 1545, Mk 4,28)

In summary, by now we can identify the following stages in the diachronic development of the intensifier in German: In the first stage, spanning from Old High German into Middle High German, the inflected form *selb* served

¹⁰ It is a crucial issue that demands attention is the spread of the reflexive pronoun itself from the accusative singular to the dative (and, in some varieties, also to the first person plural). But that is the task of subsequent investigations.

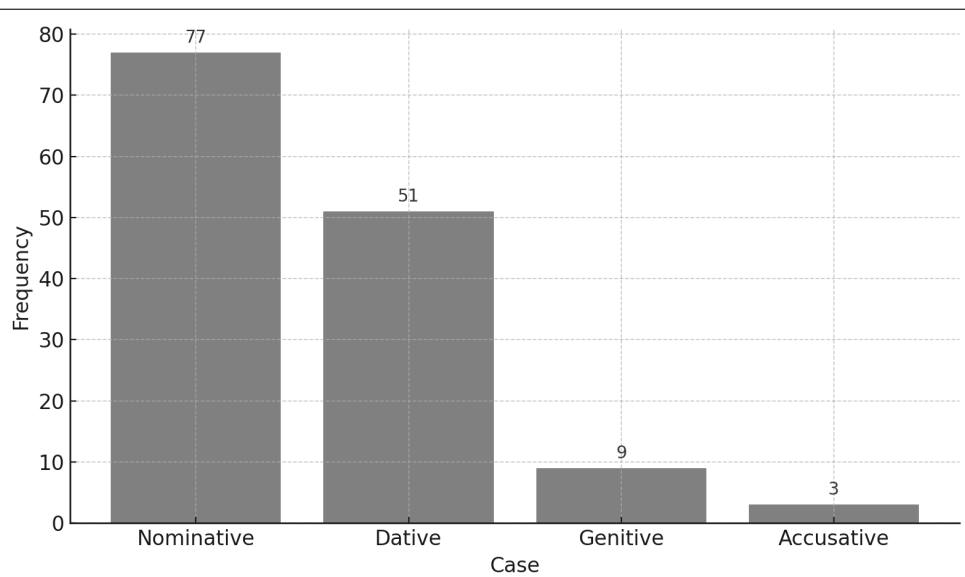


Figure 4 Distribution of cases with intensifiers Luther Bible (1545) [47 unclear/ambiguous cases excluded]; Standardized residuals (deviation from the expected value, i.e. arithmetic mean of the table values, 35): nominative: +7.10 (strongly overrepresented), dative: +2.70 (slightly overrepresented), genitive: -4.39 (underrepresented), accusative: -5.41 (strongly under-represented)

primarily to disambiguate reflexive constructions in non-accusative cases and to highlight or contextualize the reflexive expression. In the second stage, beginning in the 16th century, the uninflected form *selbst* gained prominence as a result of particle formation in written language. However, *selber* remained part of the system. As seen in the works of Luther, both forms frequently appear side by side, with both forms still functioning as a disambiguator for atypical reflexive contexts and to disambiguate between personal pronouns and reflexive meaning especially in the dative.

The key question for the subsequent stage, in New High German, is whether this coexistence of *selbst* and *selber* has led to a *functional differentiation*, or whether it remains a case of *free variation*, possibly supplemented by register-specific preferences—*selbst* being more typical of formal standard usage, and *selber* associated with colloquial language.

To explore this question further, I conducted a study of selected authors and speakers from the 17th century to the present.

3.2 *Functional development in New High German*

Let us now turn to New High German and address the central question of whether there is a functional distinction between *selbst* and *selber*, and whether the situation of formal overabundance may have led to a functional split between the two forms. In order to investigate this hypothesis, I examined a set of *individual linguistic systems* to capture *system-internal variation* as it is crucial to assess whether individual speakers/writers differentiate between form and function. Specifically, I analyzed the following sources:

- Martin Luther (1483–1546; Eisleben): Bible translation, *Letzter Hand* (1545)
- Paul Jacob Marperger (1656–1730; Nuremberg): primarily commercial and economic writings (Marperger 1715, 1717a, 1717b, 1719, 1724), accessed via the corpus *Deutsches Textarchiv* (DTA, <https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de>, February 3, 2026)
- Jean Paul (Richter) (1763–1825; Bayreuth): selection from the *Letters* (only those authored by Jean Paul), accessed via the special corpus of his correspondence (<https://jeanpaul-edition.de/start.html>; data version 9.0 https://github.com/telota/jean_paul_briefe, February 3, 2026)

- Anne Will¹¹ (b. 1966; Cologne): podcast *Politik mit Anne Will* (episodes from August to December 2024, Podigee AI transcripts,¹² 2–3 speakers; <https://politik-mit-annewill.podigee.io>, February 3, 2026)

The selection was guided by several criteria. First, the goal was to examine temporally distinct yet internally consistent linguistic systems in order to identify system-internal patterns. Each source was chosen to provide sufficient data—ideally around 100 attestations per form—to enable meaningful quantitative analysis. Larger data sets were normalized to 100 records per form (the selection was made randomly). To minimize regional bias, the sample was restricted, where possible, to authors/speakers from the Central German area. Furthermore, the inclusion of various genres, including written and spoken (standard) language, serves to counterbalance potential text-type effects and allows for a broader view on usage patterns.

From Jean Paul, I selected a subset of letters in which he is clearly identified as the author. To broaden the spectrum of text types and to include spoken language, I also analyzed a podcast series. While this format does not constitute an individual linguistic system in the strict sense — since it involves interaction of the host (Anne Will) with one to two additional speakers — it still allows for a meaningful comparison. There is only one interviewee who behaves conspicuously with regard to the use of the intensifier in the interview with the host; we will come back to this at the end of this section (see page 25). Notably, Anne Will herself speaks for most of the time, although this is merely an incidentally observation that I have not quantified further.

The podcast corpus is based on AI transcripts that do not encode prosodic detail. This is a limitation, since prosodic phrasing and intonation are central to scope marking in spoken German. The present analysis therefore focuses on syntactic environments, but future work should ideally integrate prosodic annotation.

The rationale behind selecting these individual systems was, as mentioned, to capture *system-internal variation*, while also ensuring a distribution across different historical stages. Each of the selected sources represents a distinct period, thus allowing for a temporally differentiated view. In addition, the analysis aimed to ensure a critical mass of data, ideally with at least 100 attestations of the relevant intensifier forms per system.

¹¹ Anne Will is a German television journalist who hosted a weekly political talk show on German TV from 2007–2023. She previously worked as a presenter of the „Tagesthemen“ program (a daily television news magazine broadcast on the public channel), among other things. Her speaking register is (phonetically) a very high standard variety.

¹² These transcripts were checked in random samples for correctness in relation to the phenomenon under investigation.

In order to test whether specific factors influence the choice between *selbst* and *selber*, I investigated a range of morphosyntactic and context-related variables. Among these were function type (adnominal, adverbial, or focus), ambiguity, verb semantics (internally vs. externally directed), part of speech, number, case, person of the referential noun phrase, syllable count of the preceding word, position in the sentence (end of sentence yes/no), and the number of potential focus NPs in the clause. In summary, of all the variables that were analysed, only one was found to be statistically significant across multiple speakers and systems: the number of possible focus noun phrases.

But what exactly does „potential focus NPs“ mean? Consider the following examples from Luther’s 1545 Bible translation:

- (9) a) *Sondern wir_i haben seine Herrlichkeit_j selber_{i/j} gesehen.*
 but we have his glory INT seen
 ‘But we ourselves have seen his glory.’ (Lutherbibel 1545, 2. Petrus 1,16)
- b) *Hilff dir_i selber_i.*
 help yourself INT
 ‘Help yourself.’ (Lutherbibel 1545, Matthew 27,40)

In (9 a) the intensifier *selber* can attach either to the subject *wir* or to the object *seine Herrlichkeit*, yielding ambiguity. In contrast, (9 b) provides only a single referential candidate (*dir*) for focus. Thus, the number of syntactically available noun phrases for focus affects the interpretation of the intensifier’s scope.

Interestingly, in Luther’s data, no statistically significant effect was found: *selbst* and *selber* are used with roughly equal frequency regardless of focus ambiguity (table 3).

Luther (1545)	<i>selber</i> (n=86)	<i>selbs</i> (n=100 out of 469)
> 1 possible focus NPs	12	12
= 1 focus NP	74	88

Table 3 Distribution of *selber/selbst* by number of possible focus NPs in Luther’s Bible (1545)

However, a strikingly different pattern emerges in the corpus of Paul Jacob Marperger (table 4). Here, forms like *selbst* and the now obsolete *selbsten* appear up to five times more frequently in clauses with only one potential focus NP. In contexts with multiple focus candidates, *selber* is clearly preferred.

Marperger	<i>selber</i> (n=99)	<i>selbst</i> (n=100 out of 467)	<i>selbesten</i> (n=63)
= 1 focus NP	46	84	50
> 1 possible focus NPs	53	16	13

Table 4 Distribution of *selber/selbst/selbesten* by number of possible focus NPs at Marperger

The statistical analysis confirms the observed distributional tendency with high significance. A chi-squared test of the data in table 4 yielded a value of $\chi^2 = 34.95$ with a corresponding p-value of < 0.0001 . This means that the likelihood of the observed distribution arising purely by chance under the null hypothesis is less than 0.001%. The effect size, measured by the odds ratio, is 5.32. In other words, the combined forms *selbst* and *selbesten* occur 5.32 times more frequently in contexts with only one potential focus NP than does *selber*. The strength of the association between form choice and the number of focus NPs is also supported by the phi coefficient ($\varphi = 0.365$), which indicates a moderate relationship between the two variables. Taken together, these results provide strong evidence that *selbst* and *selbesten* are dispreferred in contexts with more than one focus NP and are predominantly used in reflexive or unambiguous single-focus constructions.

The same effect holds in the letters of Jean Paul, where *selbst* is almost four times more likely to occur in unambiguous focus contexts than *selber*. The data from Jean Paul's letters also reveal a statistically significant correlation between form choice and the number of potential focus NPs. A chi-squared test of the data in table 5 produced a value of $\chi^2 = 18.46$ with a p-value of < 0.0001 , indicating that the observed distribution is highly unlikely to have arisen by chance. The odds ratio is 3.76, meaning that *selbst* is 3.76 times more likely to occur in contexts with a single focus NP than *selber*. This supports the hypothesis that *selbst* is associated with unambiguous focus structures. The phi coefficient ($\varphi = 0.30$) further confirms a moderate correlation between the number of focus NPs and form choice. In sum, the data suggest that Jean Paul avoids *selbst* in contexts involving more than one potential focus NP, favoring *selber* in such cases.

In the Anne Will podcast corpus, this ratio increases to nearly 9:1 in favor of *selbst* (based on the data in table 6). The results from the podcast data also exhibit a statistically robust effect. A chi-squared test yielded $\chi^2 = 16.80$

Jean Paul	<i>selber</i> (n=100 out of 1086)	<i>selbst</i> (n=105 out of 399)
= 1 focus NP	46	80
> 1 possible focus NPs	54	25

Table 5 Distribution of *selber/selbst* by number of possible focus NPs in Jean Paul's letters

with a p-value of < 0.0001 , indicating that the likelihood of the observed distribution arising under the null hypothesis is extremely low. The odds ratio is particularly striking: *selbst* occurs 9.32 times more frequently than *selber* in contexts where only a single focus NP is available. This strongly suggests a clear functional preference. The phi coefficient ($\varphi = 0.26$) points to a moderate, yet consistent correlation between form choice and the number of potential focus NPs. As in the historical data, *selbst* is systematically avoided in contexts involving more than one focus NP, underscoring its association with narrow syntactic scope.

However, what we also see very clearly in the podcast corpus is that *selber* occurs significantly more often than *selbst*; I interpret this as an effect of spoken language. Nevertheless, it is still noteworthy that *selbst* is almost never used with >1 focus NP.

Anne Will Podcast	<i>selber</i> (n=166)	<i>selbst</i> (n=83)
= 1 focus NP	123	80
> 1 possible focus NPs	43	3*

Table 6 Distribution of *selber/selbst* by number of possible focus NPs in „Politik mit Anne Will“ (08-12.2024); *evidence from only one speaker

While the main analysis relies on relative proportions, figure 5 provides the absolute frequencies of *selbst* and *selber* in the podcast corpus.

All instances of *selbst* used with more than one possible focus NP stem from a single speaker, the politician Ricarda Lang (b. 1994 in Filderstadt), who has a Swabian background.¹³ This may indicate that she actively avoids

¹³ Her Swabian background is barely audible, apart from one rather noticeable peculiarity: she

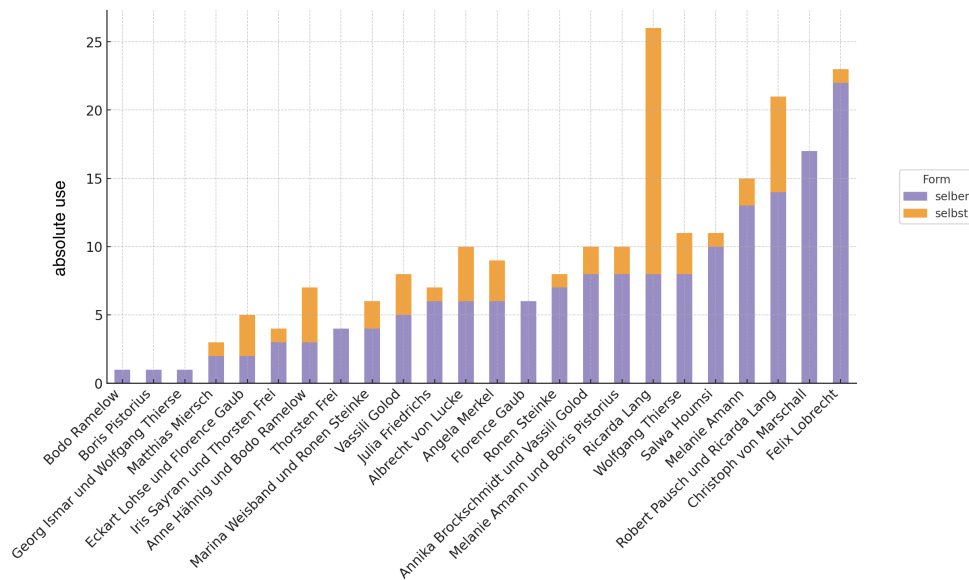


Figure 5 Absolute frequencies of *selbst* vs. *selber* by interview partner

using *selber*, likely due to its perception as a colloquial non-standard variant. Ricarda Lang may therefore be influenced by the normative idea of taking special care to avoid *selber* in order to reduce her dialectal imprint. All three occurrences of *selbst* with > 1 focus NPs come from Ricarda Lang; if these occurrences were removed from the data set, the picture would be even clearer.

3.3 Focus scope and syntactic differentiation

Taken together, these findings suggest an emerging functional split: *selbst* tends to be used when only one potential focus NP is available, while *selber* remains the preferred form when the scope of the intensifier spans multiple referential elements. This distinction appears increasingly robust across genres and time periods, with a possible intensification in spoken language.

The syntactic implications of this pattern are intriguing. If we conceptualize intensifiers in terms of scope, *selber* may represent the wide-scope variant (10 a), while *selbst* encodes narrow scope (10 b). This resonates with the distribution of the intensifying focus particle *selbst*, which only occurs cannot pronounce the voiced [z].

with narrow scope (e.g., *selbst Sophie trinkt Kaffee* ‘Even Sophie drinks coffee’). Moreover, this mirrors the syntactic distinction known from English between adverbial and adnominal reflexives (see above example 5, p. 5), where the adnominal use typically involve tighter syntactic integration, while the adverbial use implies broader scope.

- (10) a) *Sophie_i trinkt den Kaffee_j selber_{ij}*.
 Sophie drinks the coffee INT
 ‘Sophie herself drinks the coffee.’
- b) *Sophie_i selbst_i trinkt den Kaffee*.
 Sophie INT drinks the coffee
 ‘Sophie herself drinks the coffee.’
- c) *Selbst/*Selber_i Sophie_i trinkt den Kaffee*.
 even/*self Sophie drinks the coffee
 ‘Even Sophie drinks the coffee.’

Based on these parallels, I propose rethinking the traditional semantic classification of German intensifiers in favor of a syntactically grounded account. The observed distributional patterns suggest that what has been described as adverbial vs. adnominal usage may in fact correlate with structural scope: *selbst* marking syntactically integrated, narrowly focused elements, and *selber* signaling a broader, clause-level intensification.

4 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Conclusion: The tree stages of the German reflexive intensifier

This article has examined the synchronic and diachronic development of the reflexive intensifier forms *selbst* and *selber* in German. Drawing on both historical and modern data, including qualitative and quantitative analysis, the study set out to determine whether we are dealing with a case of genuine free variation, sociolinguistically conditioned usage, or an emerging functional split.

The proposed functional split between *selbst* (narrow scope) and *selber* (wide scope) can be further supported by prosodic evidence: in spoken German, narrow scope typically correlates with close prosodic attachment, while wide scope is often signaled by looser prosodic phrasing. Although prosodic data could not be analyzed here, but their theoretical relevance should be emphasized and taken into account in follow-up studies.

To this end, I began by tracing the diachronic evolution of the intensifier from its Indo-European and Old High German origins. We saw that the intensifier *selb* initially functioned as an inflected pronominal element, playing an important disambiguating role in reflexive constructions — particularly in non-accusative cases, where no dedicated reflexive pronoun was available. This early stage of use reflects the functional core of the intensifier in Old and Middle High German.

A major shift occurred in Early New High German, where morphologically frozen forms emerged and gradually replaced the inflected paradigm. From the 14th century onward, multiple non-inflected forms appear side by side — including *selb*, *selber*, and eventually *selb(e)st* and *selbsten*. The increasing use of *selbst* in written language around the 16th century marks the second stage in the evolution of the intensifier: a stage of coexisting forms, deflection, and its slowly increasing stylistic indexing (formal vs. informal).

In the third stage — from the 17th century to the present — we observe signs of functional differentiation. This is not only reflected in stylistic evaluation (e.g. *selbst* as standard, *selber* as colloquial), but also in syntactic behavior. But while Schäfer (2025) documents a sociolinguistically motivated avoidance (register sensitivity) of some forms, the present study shows that there is also a functionally-syntactically motivated distribution. Through the analysis of individual linguistic systems — including Martin Luther, Paul Jacob Marperger, Jean Paul, and Anne Will — the study demonstrates a robust and statistically significant pattern: *selbst* tends to occur with a single identifiable focus NP, while *selber* is preferred when the scope of the intensifier spans multiple referents.

This pattern suggests an incipient functional differentiation, whereby *selbst* is emerging as a marker of narrow, adnominal scope, while *selber* increasingly signals wide, adverbial scope. These findings call into question traditional semantic typologies and point instead to syntactic scope and integration as key factors in the distribution of intensifiers.

In sum, the development of *selbst* and *selber* in German can be characterized by three diachronic stages:

- Stage 1 (OHG–MHG): Fully inflected *selb* serves disambiguating and reflexive-marking functions in non-accusative cases; intensifier operates within nominal agreement paradigms.
- Stage 2 (MHG–ENHG): Morphological erosion leads to the emergence of invariant forms (*selbst*, *selber*); coexisting forms with increasing stylistic and functional divergence, especially in the dative.
- Stage 3 (17th century–present): Functional differentiation between the two

forms; *selbst* specializes for narrow syntactic scope, particularly in single-focus NP contexts and in formal registers, while *selber* is used for wider scope and is preferred in colloquial registers.

While Stage 3 can be described as the emergence of functional differentiation, this distinction has not yet fully stabilized in present-day German. A possible Stage 4 might therefore be envisaged, in which a complete form–function differentiation between *selbst* and *selber* is established.

One important aspect of this development is its medial asymmetry. The spread of *selbst* is primarily a phenomenon of written language, where it gradually and quite slowly established itself as the standard form of 20th century German. In oral usage, by contrast, *selber* has remained robust, especially in Upper German dialects (cf. Schäfer 2025). The functional differentiation between the two forms thus presupposes the dominance of *selbst* in writing: only when the written norm fed back into spoken usage in the course of the naturalization of German standard language (cf. Pröll 2021) did the opposition between *selbst* and *selber* become functionally entrenched.

The findings for Stage 3 also allow us to revisit the statement by Edmondson & Plank (1978: 388), who suggest that some speakers tend to avoid *selber* in adnominal contexts. While their claim remains cautious and largely impressionistic, the present study offers empirical support for a more systematic interpretation. The quantitative analyses across multiple linguistic systems demonstrate that *selbst* in New High German is significantly more frequent in syntactic environments characterized by narrow scope — typically adnominal configurations involving a single identifiable focus NP. In contrast, *selber* occurs more frequently in structures with broader scope or multiple referents. Rather than reflecting mere stylistic preference, this distributional pattern suggests an emerging form–function alignment along syntactic lines. In this light, the avoidance of *selber* in adnominal contexts is not simply a matter of register, but correlates with structural constraints that may reflect a deeper reorganization within the intensifier system.

These results lend support to the hypothesis that formal overabundance can develop into a syntactic distinction via functional reanalysis — a process that may be described as a case of exaptation (see the discussion in the following section 4.2).

The historical development of *selbst* and *selber* offers an instructive case for exploring the relationship between variation and grammatical change. As the data have shown, the coexistence of multiple formal variants does not necessarily imply functional differentiation at the outset. Indeed, over long stretches of time, *selbst* and *selber* appear to function as stylistic or regional variants with considerable overlap in usage.

However, the emergence of systematic patterns in form-function alignment — especially in the third stage — suggests that structural change may arise out of sustained variation. In this sense, the development of the German intensifier system supports a model of grammatical change in which overabundance provides the ground toward a functional reanalysis. The pivotal element in this regard is that it is not the mere existence of variations that propels change; nor is it the pressure to engender functional contrasts within the system in the sense of form-function optimisation. Rather, it is the system itself that undergoes change in a non-directed and non-teleological manner.

This case thus speaks to broader questions in linguistic theory: When does formal variation stabilize as free variation, and when does it evolve into a grammaticalized contrast? Under what conditions does a system tolerate redundant forms, and when does it restructure them along functional lines?

The diachronic trajectory of *selbst* and *selber* thus illustrates how formal coexistence can gradually develop into functional specialization, though the process remains incomplete even today. Beyond this specific case, however, the findings also raise broader questions: How long can a system tolerate redundancy? Under what conditions does variation turn into grammatical differentiation, and how do functionalist models account for such latency? These issues will be taken up in the following subsection.

4.2 Grammaticalization and exaptation

The development of the German reflexive intensifier can be framed theoretically through a dual perspective involving grammaticalization and functional reanalysis, which exhibits exaptive traits.

Grammaticalization describes the well-attested pathway whereby lexical or inflected items develop into grammatical markers through processes such as morphological reduction and reanalysis (among others Traugott 2004). The transition from the fully inflected pronominal/adjectival form *selb-* to invariant forms like *selbst* and *selber* (Stage 2) is a typical instance of grammaticalization. This loss of case and gender inflection is also referred to as deflection or morphosyntactic erosion (cf. Norde 2020, 2009).

However, the later emergence of a functional opposition between *selbst* and *selber* (Stage 3) is not adequately captured by grammaticalization alone. Here, the notion of exaptation, as introduced by Lass (1990, 1997), becomes relevant. Exaptation describes the reuse of structural „junk“ or redundant material for new purposes.

Although *selbst* and *selber* were never entirely functionless, their long-standing redundancy created a reservoir that could later be repurposed for a new functional contrast (narrow vs. broad scope, formal vs. informal regis-

ters). Therefore, the differentiation of *selbst* and *selber* can be understood as a case of functional reanalysis with exaptive traits in the broad sense.

The three identified stages of the diachronic development can be summarized under this theoretical framework:

- i. Stage 1 (OHG): *selb-* is the pre-grammaticalized source, functioning as a pronominal/adjectival intensifier with a full paradigm of inflection.
- ii. Stage 2 (MHG–ENHG): Grammaticalization occurs through morphological erosion (deflection), leading to the emergence of invariant forms (*selbst*, *selber*). The intensifying function remained relatively stable during this morphological shift.
- iii. Stage 3 (NHG): Functional specialization occurs (*selbst* specializing in narrow syntactic scope/formal registers; *selber* preferred for wide scope/informal speech). This development is a functional reanalysis that exploited the redundancy that had persisted for centuries, exhibiting exaptive traits.

This two-step trajectory—grammaticalization as morphological reduction (Stage 2), followed by functional specialization through the reuse of redundancy (Stage 3)—illustrates that the persistence of variation between *selbst* and *selber* represents the gradual exploitation of redundant forms for new contrasts, rather than a failure of system optimization.

4.3 Discussion: Does variation necessitate change?

From a functionalist perspective, a language system is generally expected to eliminate redundancy and vagueness quickly, as efficient communication favors a one-to-one form–function mapping. The coexistence of two forms with the same apparent function, known as overabundance, is often assumed to be unstable. By this logic, the German intensifier system (*selbst* vs. *selber*) should have resolved its overabundance rapidly.

However, the historical reality in German emphatically contradicts this expectation. A rapid resolution did not occur. Several forms of the intensifier coexisted for centuries, often functioning as stylistic or regional variants with considerable overlap. The system tolerated this redundancy remarkably long, stabilizing as long-term free variation. *selber* never vanished, persisting strongly in spoken and informal New High German despite prescriptive pressures favoring *selbst*.

The ultimate change is only slowly becoming apparent after a prolonged period of stable free variation. It manifested as a functional reanalysis of the

existing variation, rather than the abrupt invention of a new form. External factors, such as the naturalization of standard German, created a catalytic condition for this functional split.

The long-standing redundancy was repurposed into a new distinction: While *selbst* became increasingly associated with a narrow, adnominal focus (most likely also due to the formal similarity to the focus particle). In the context of a broader, adverbial scope (wider scope/multiple referents), the preference has shifted towards *selber* for its broader adverbial scope. This refunctionalization of those two forms exhibits exaptive traits in the broad sense of Lass (1990, 1997): The overlapping coexistence served as the raw material for innovation.

In summary, three key observations can be derived from the development of *selbst* and *selber* as a syntactically motivated allomorphy:

- i. Redundancy can persist: The mere coexistence of two equivalent forms did not force an immediate restructuring; variation stabilized as long-term free variation.
- ii. Functional reanalysis with exaptive traits: Change involved a gradual reanalysis of existing variation into a new contrast, exploiting the long-standing overlap as structural potential.
- iii. Systemic, Non-Teleological Change: Structural change may arise out of sustained variation. Overabundance provides the ground toward a functional reanalysis, but the process is not propelled by pressure toward form-function optimisation. Rather, it is the system itself that undergoes change in a non-directed and non-teleological manner.

This study was able to demonstrate a broader methodological point: if language change is not (always) teleological, linguistic analysis should not be either. The present study shows the value of a multifactorial perspective that integrates different structural levels and remains open to unexpected outcomes. Only such openness made it possible to uncover the role of scope, a factor I would not have anticipated a priori, but which proved crucial to understanding the functional differentiation of *selbst* and *selber*.

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