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## THE DISTRIBUTION OF RECIPROCAL PRONOUNS IN A PRESCRIPTIVE PERSPECTIVE

**Abstract.** In this article, the distribution of reciprocal pronouns in the English language is investigated. This distribution is regulated by the prescriptive rule stating that we use *each other* when we refer to two persons or things, and we use *one another* in situations when we have more than two referents. The main task of this work is to check if the rule is obeyed in practice. In order to do so, we have chosen 400 unambiguous sentences from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*, including *each other* and *one another*. The results show that the prescriptive rule is violated in many instances, and that the two reciprocals are often used interchangeably. This lets us suppose that the prescriptive tradition is no longer as strong as it used to be in the past.

### 0. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Since there are two reciprocal pronouns in English, *each other* and *one another*, many grammarians aim to explain in what contexts these pronouns should be used. The distribution of reciprocals is regulated by the prescriptive rule. According to it, we should use *each other* when we refer to two items, and *one another* to refer to more than two things. This hypothesis is subject to examination in this article.

### 1. THE DEFINITION AND PROPERTIES OF RECIPROCAL PRONOUNS

Functionally, pronouns are proforms that can be used as substitutes for noun phrases. In other words, they can replace nouns in a sentence. There

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are many types of pronouns, for instance personal (*I, she, them*); demonstrative (*this, those*); possessive (*their, mine, hers*); relative (*who, which, that*) and reflexive pronouns (*himself, themselves*). Reciprocal pronouns are yet another type of pronouns – the main subject of this paper.

Reciprocal pronouns along with reflexive pronouns belong to the class of anaphors. According to Crystal (2008: 25), the anaphor is “a type of noun phrase which has no independent reference, but refers to some other sentence constituent”. This means that both reflexive and reciprocal pronouns need antecedents. According to the definition given by Carnie (2001: 91), an antecedent is “an NP that gives its meaning to a pronoun or anaphor”. In sentences (1) and (2) below, the phrase *John and Mary* is an antecedent of reflexive pronoun and reciprocal pronoun, respectively:

- (1) [John and Mary]<sub>i</sub> cut [*themselves*]<sub>i</sub>.  
 (2) [John and Mary]<sub>j</sub> saw [*each other*]<sub>j</sub>.

The significant difference between reflexive and reciprocal pronouns is “the obligatorily plural character of the noun phrase to which the latter refer” (KJELLMER 1982: 236). It means that in the case of reciprocals, we have more than one participant of an action. Raumolin-Brunberg (1997: 227) says the same, claiming that reciprocal pronouns “can co-refer only to plural noun phrases, since reciprocity presupposes more than one participant”. As a result, sentence (3) is unacceptable. We always need a plural NP in order to use a reciprocal:

- (3) \*Mark cut *each other*.

Another property, as Kjellmer (1982: 240) indicates, is that the antecedent of a reciprocal pronoun is confined to the clause of the reciprocal. Thus the sentence below is ungrammatical:

- (4) \*They saw him smile at *each other*.

(KJELLMER 1982: 240)

The problem with sentence (4) is that the antecedent and the reciprocal are not in the same clause.

Another point concerns the distribution of reciprocal pronouns: they cannot occupy all the positions in a clause. They can, for instance, be the object of the sentence:

- (5) We love *each other*.

It is possible for a reciprocal to act as a complement:

(6) All we have left in the world is *one another*.

(KJELLMER 1982: 232)

*Each other* and *one another*, however, cannot be used in the subject position in finite clauses (RAUMOLIN-BRUNBERG 1997: 227). Therefore, instead of (7) we prefer (8):

(7) ?The children wanted to know what *each other* were/was watching.

(8) *Each* of the children wanted to know what *the other* was watching.

Nevertheless, the reciprocal can occur as the subject of non-finite clauses. Kjellmer provides us with some examples:

(9) They saw *each other* smile.

(10) His parents relied on *each other* to lock up.

(KJELLMER 1982: 234)

## 2. PRESCRIPTIVE RULES CONCERNING RECIPROCAL PRONOUNS

Because we have two reciprocal pronouns, linguists have been trying to establish the rule that governs our choice of a certain reciprocal in a given context. In this article we will present the viewpoints of some grammarians who took a stand on the issue. The prescriptive rule dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the rule, when we refer to two persons, *each other* should be used; and when we have more than two referents, we should use *one another*. Now we will consult different grammar books to see how they deal with the issue of reciprocal pronouns.

According to Quirk *et al.* (1985: 364), the prescriptive rule is not obeyed and there is no difference in the use of the two reciprocal pronouns. However, the authors draw our attention to register, pointing out that *each other* is more commonly used in an informal style, while *one another* is preferred in more formal contexts.

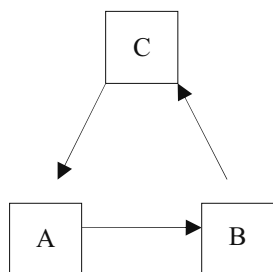
Swan (1980: § 191) also mentions prescriptive tradition, but claims that there is little or no difference between *each other* and *one another*. Gucker (1966: 55) shares a prescriptive viewpoint, maintaining that *each other* should be used with reference to two, while *one another* suggests more than two. Similarly, as Foley and Hall (2003: 266) note, we tend to use *each other* when we have two subjects; when we refer to more than two, we usually use *one another*. Nevertheless, in informal English we can use both

of these forms interchangeably. Side and Wellman (2002: 150) notice no difference between the two pronouns, claiming that they are basically the same.

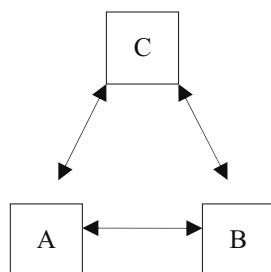
A considerably different view is that of Thomson and Martinet (1986: 70). They believe that although both *each other* and *one another* can be used with reference to two subjects or more, *each other* is used more frequently when we refer to more than two things. This opinion is completely different from those mentioned above, as the former approaches at least accept the existence of the prescriptive rule. However, Thomson and Martinet flatly reject it; they are the first to assert that *each other* is preferred in a situation when we refer to more than two, while the other authors argued just the opposite.

Stuurman (1987) in his seminal article proposes a completely different theory. He draws a distinction between *each other* and *one another*, suggesting that the former expresses chain relations, while the latter, true reciprocal relations. In order to explain Stuurman's reasoning, we shall assume that we have three participants of an action: A, B and C. Chain relations are schematically represented in (a), whereas true reciprocal relations in (b).

(a)  $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$



(b)  $A \leftrightarrow B \leftrightarrow C$



As the arrows indicate, a chain relation is a one-way relationship. Although it may involve more than two participants, first there is a relation between A and B, then between B and C, and finally, between C and A. In true reciprocity, the action involves relations both between A & B and B & A, and between B & C and C & B, etc. In this respect, according to Stuurman (1987: 356), *one another* is perfectly suitable even when referring only to two participants, just as in the following sentences:

(11) Betty and Herbert didn't speak to *one another* on the Sunday.

(12) Fortunately, the two men took a liking to *one another*...

(STUURMAN 1987: 356)

Example (11) means that neither Betty spoke to Herbert nor Herbert spoke to Betty; in (12), a liking for the other developed in both of the men.

To illustrate a chain relation, let us have a look at (13):

(13) ... a writer's book should be as different from *each other* as possible.

(STUURMAN 1987: 359)

We can expect each book by one writer to be different from his/her preceding one. Nonetheless, it would be almost impossible to write a book completely different from all preceding books by this author, which would have been suggested by the use of *one another*.

Stuurman (1987) suggests that sometimes the meaning of a sentence can change, depending on which reciprocal pronoun we use. In some cases, only one pronoun can be used because the other one is impossible. He illustrates it with the examples below:

(14) a. ... their mouths found *one another* in the darkness ...

b. \* their mouths found *each other* ...

(STUURMAN 1987: 359)

It is impossible to replace *one another* with *each other* in this sentence because we assume that "the two participants equally wanted to engage in a kiss" (STUURMAN 1987: 359).

In this section we reviewed some approaches to the prescriptive rule. It appears that almost each of the authors acknowledges the existence of the prescriptive tradition, but the majority of them claim that this is no longer important. The only researcher who does not mention the prescriptive rule is Stuurman (1987), who puts forward his own, alternative theory.

### 3. THE DISTRIBUTION OF RECIPROCAL PRONOUNS ON THE BASIS OF A CORPUS ANALYSIS

#### 3.1. METHODOLOGICAL POINTS

The sentences for the analysis were taken from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*, which consists of 425 million words. The data in the corpus cover years 1990-2011<sup>1</sup>. The corpus enables us to search for a

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<sup>1</sup> The data used in this article come from before 1<sup>st</sup> May 2011.

word or a phrase according to a certain year, period of time (1990-1994, 1995-1999, 2000-2004, 2005-2009, 2010-2011) and 5 categories (spoken, fiction, magazine, newspaper, academic).

Since the amount of data is very large, we decided to compare the use of *each other* and *one another* in two categories: spoken and academic. We will have four categories to compare: *each other* spoken, *each other* academic, *one another* spoken and *one another* academic.

The selected sentences must be unambiguous. There must be a clear indication that the subject is either two persons or things, or more than two. For this reason subjects such as: *people, members, children* were not taken into consideration.

### 3.2. CORPUS OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ENGLISH

*The Corpus of Contemporary American English* contains 58 007 entries of *each other* and 15 647 instances of *one another*. The corpus offers a possibility of looking for words and phrases within certain periods of 5 years. When we tried to discover any regularity in the distribution of reciprocals in 5-year periods, nothing insightful could be seen. For this reason, we decided to go further and look at the distribution of the pronouns in two categories. The corpus enables us to seek words according to five categories, however, two of them will be sufficient here: spoken and academic.

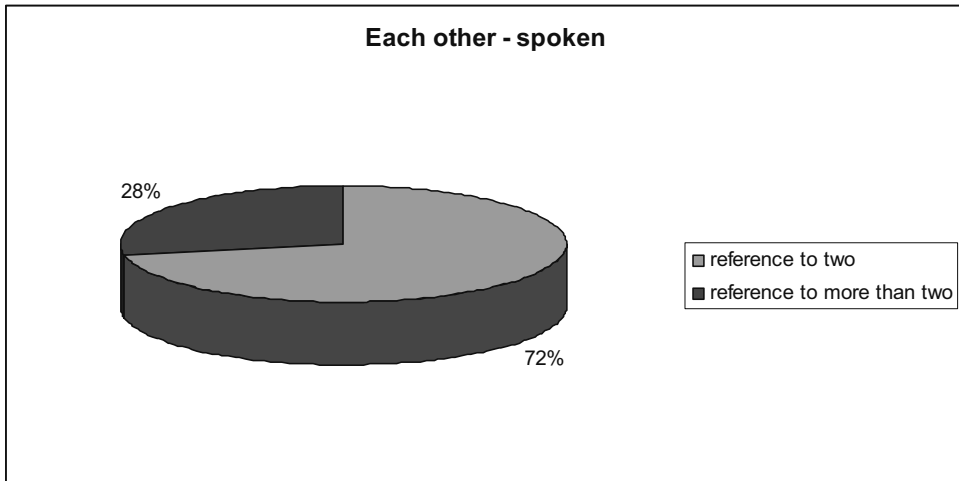
First, let us present the table which illustrates the proportion of each pronoun in the two chosen categories:

**Table 1.** The number of instances of *each other* and *one another* in spoken and academic category

Category \ Pronoun	Each other	One another
SPOKEN	10 402	1 723
ACADEMIC	8 115	4 265

Having chosen two categories, we have analyzed 400 unambiguous sentences to see whether the prescriptive rule which suggests that we should use *each other* with reference to two persons or things, and *one another* when referring to more than two, is obeyed. The analysis of sentences with *each other* and *one another* yielded interesting results. Now we will compare the obtained results with the prescriptive rule.

First, let us have a look at Figure 1 which presents the results of the analysis of 100 sentences with *each other* from the spoken language:



**Figure 1.** The results of the analysis of 100 sentences with *each other* from the spoken language.

Out of 100 sentences, 72 refer to two persons or things while 28 refer to more than two. The majority of sentences follow the prescriptive rule.

We will now present exemplary sentences from the corpus. In (1) *each other* has the antecedent clearly suggesting two participants, in (2) the reference is to more than two:

- (1) Well, this is the first time that John McCain and Barack Obama will be seated next to **each other** during a debate.

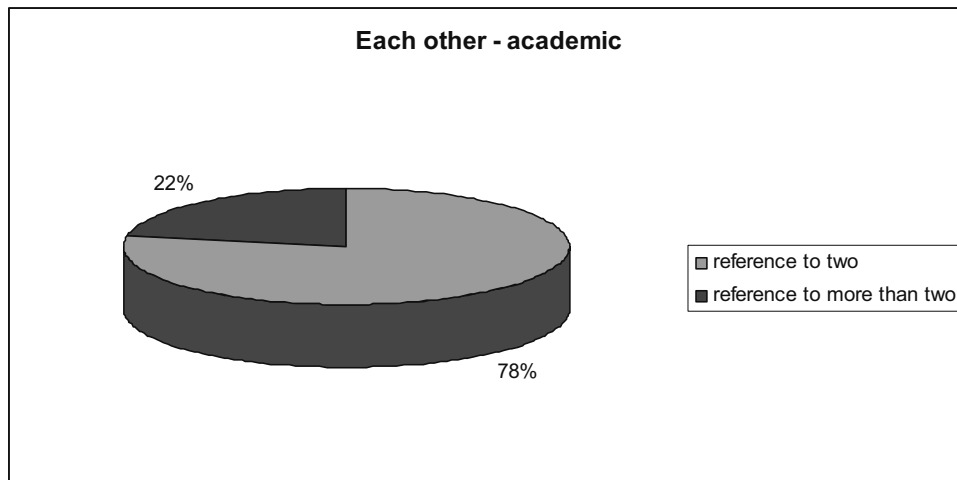
[Date 2008 (081015) / Title [ John McCain and Barack Obama prepare for their final presidential debate in ...] / Source CNN Newsroom]<sup>2</sup>

- (2) Now, the modern tragedy is that all of these groups — Serbs, Croatians, and Muslims — who have distrusted **each other** for centuries have now come to hate **each other**. And now they are killing **each other**.

[1993 (19930318) / Peter Jennings Reporting: The Land of the Demons / ABC\_Special]

<sup>2</sup> References to exemplary sentences are given as they are in the corpus. All the references contain date, title and source. Additionally, some of the examples include publication information and information about the author.

Now let us examine Figure 2, which presents the results of the analysis of sentences with *each other* from the academic language:



**Figure 2.** The results of the analysis of 100 sentences with *each other* from the academic language.

The proportion here is similar to the one presented in the previous chart. 78% of sentences comply with the prescriptive rule, while 22% do not. We will illustrate this with two sentences from the corpus:

- (3) When it comes to singing about yourself, the hands-down champions are two musical forms that are rarely, if ever, associated with **each other**: country and hip-hop.

[2004 (Summer) / Heavy Meta. / American Scholar / Summer2004, Vol. 73 Issue 3, p89-101, 13p]

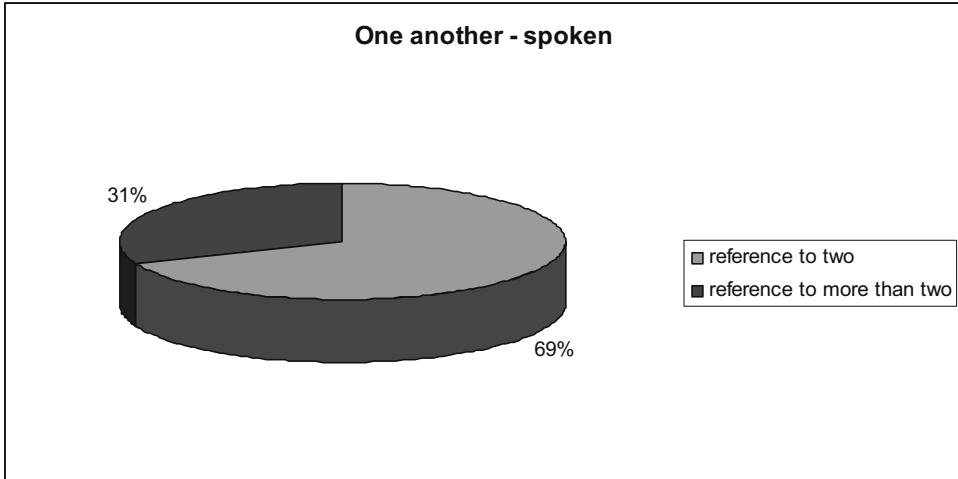
- (4) Both the germinating mix and Top It are new and Harper says all three products complement **each other**.

[1998 (Oct) / From ice cream to nuts in food residuals composting. / BioCycle / Oct98, Vol. 39 Issue 10, p43, 5p / Farrell, Molly]

Sentence (3) refers to two kinds of music. (4) has a plural subject, *three products* — and is a perfect example of how the rule is disobeyed. This indicates that the prescriptive tradition is often violated in the formal language.



Another chart shows us the results yielded by the analysis of sentences with *one another* from the spoken language:



**Figure 3.** The results of the analysis of 100 sentences with *one another* from the spoken language.

Figure 3 presents the most striking results as it is in total contradiction to the prescriptive rule. In practice, the rule is not obeyed in 69 cases out of 100. In these 69 sentences, *one another* refers to subjects consisting of two items. Only 31 *one another* sentences have antecedents referring to more than two, which is in accordance with the prescriptive rule. At this point it would be advisable to recall Thomson and Martinet's (1986: 70) viewpoint which is the opposite of the classic prescriptive rule and well supports the situation presented in Figure 3. This situation shows that the rule laid down by prescriptive grammarians is not always obeyed in practice.

The first of the following sentences violates the prescriptive rule; the last one complies with it:

(5) Even before Secretary Baker and Foreign Minister Aziz confronted **one another** this morning in a Geneva hotel conference room, cold-eyed gamblers around the world were assessing and constantly reassessing the chances for diplomatic success.

[1991 (19910109) / Geneva Talks End on Pessimistic Note / ABC Nightline]

(6) Imagine having been a fly on the wall in a certain room in Philadelphia in the early summer of 1776 to hear what Jefferson, Franklin, Adams and the others had to say to **one another**.

[1995 (19950219) / C-SPAN COVERS POLITICS AT THE CAPITOL BUILDING 24 HOURS A DAY / CBS\_SunMorn]

Examples (7) and (8) show the sentences, in which two reciprocal pronouns are used interchangeably:

- (7) She's walking with me. At some point in time, she says that she left her cell phone in the casino and we embrace. We give **each other** a high-five and we say goodbye to **one another**, good luck. And that was the end of the conversation.

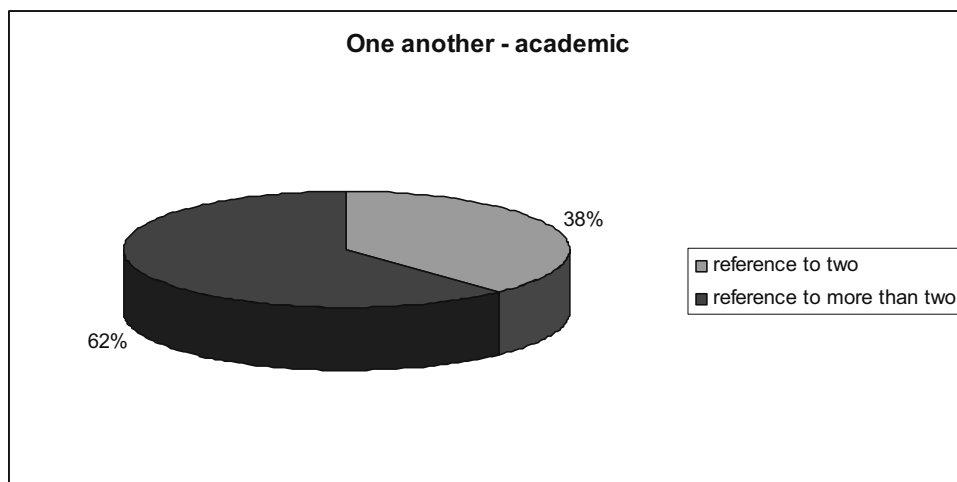
[2007 (20071222) / The Biggest Gamble; case of Christie Wilson, who went missing after a night of gambling in a casino / CBS\_48Hours / ERIN MORIARTY]

- (8) And the truth is that Madam and Eve, although they won't admit it, we like to think these two women really care about **each other**. They love **one another**.

[1997 (19971214) / Madam and Eve / NPR\_Sunday]

The examples given above constitute the argument against the prescriptive rule because the use of reciprocals in these sentences seems to be random. Nevertheless, it seems necessary at this point to mention the register. The sentences given above come from the spoken language, which is often identified with the informal style. Since the informal style is less rigid than the formal one, the prescriptive rule does not need to be obeyed so strictly. This may account for the interchangeable use of the two reciprocals in (7) and (8) (cf. Foley and Hall 2003: 266).

The last chart illustrates the sentences with *one another* from the academic language:



**Figure 4.** The results of the analysis of 100 sentences with *one another* from the academic language.

Out of these 100 sentences, 62% obey the prescriptive rule and 38% do not, having antecedents which refer to two persons or things.

Sentence (9) is a regular example, while (10) represents a violation of the prescriptive rule:

- (9) Indians and Pakistanis, Koreans and Japanese, Chinese and Taiwanese, and Americans and Soviets have met and exchanged information to help **one another**.

[1990 (Sep) / ENERGY FOR OUR GLOBE'S PEOPLE. / Environment / Sep90, Vol. 32 Issue 7, p12-15, 4p, 1bw / Lee, William S.]

- (10) What Othello and Iago do in their mutual interrogation of **one another** dominated by Othello's line of questioning is to reconstruct a narrative version of wooing whereby Cassio is an agent acting on his own behalf rather than Othello's.

[2005 (Fall) / When Chaos Is Come Again: Narrative and Narrative Analysis in Othello. / Style / Fall2005, Vol. 39 Issue 3, p259-276, 18p / Macaulay, Marcia]

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of 400 unambiguous sentences enables us to draw some important conclusions. First, the instances of *each other* considerably outnumber the instances of *one another*. This regularity can be observed on the basis of the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*, as well as in the three other corpora examined for the purpose of this article. In the *British National Corpus* there are 10 324 instances of *each other* and 2 667 cases of *one another*, in the *Time Magazine Corpus* there are 8 975 and 3 328 instances of *each other* and *one another*, respectively, and in the *Corpus of Historical American English* we can find 60 397 sentences with *each other* and only 15 630 sentences with *one another*. This may indicate that the pronoun *one another* is on its way out from the language. Another observation is that the distinction of *each other* being used when referring to two participants, and *one another* to more than two, no longer has much practical application. We have analyzed 400 sentences from four categories: *each other* spoken, *each other* academic, *one another* spoken and *one another* academic. Out of these four categories, three still follow the prescriptive rule, but the number of instances violating the rule amounts to 28% in *each other* spoken, 22% in *each other* academic and 38% in *one another* academic. These are still significant numbers. We must also remember that we have ignored all the sentences with plural subjects (like *members*, *children*, *people*) which were ambiguous.

If we had taken them into consideration, the number of cases disobeying the rule would probably be much higher. Another aspect is that the corpus contains many sentences in which the two reciprocals are used interchangeably. This evidently shows that although the prescriptive rule still exists in almost all grammar books, it is not obeyed in practice.

The category in which the prescriptive rule is flatly violated is *one another* spoken. As many as 69% of the total number of sentences do not obey the rule, referring to subjects consisting of two items. These 69% encroach on the area traditionally occupied by *each other*. The explanation for this may be the register, as the problem concerns the spoken language. Another suggestion may be that the prescriptive rule regarding the distribution of reciprocal pronouns is simply no longer in force.

Next, we need to mention the register. Let us recall what the grammarians quoted in section 2 argued for. Quirk *et al.* (1985: 364) point out that we prefer *each other* in the informal language and *one another* in formal contexts. The theory does not tie in with practice because, as we have mentioned in the previous paragraph, it is *one another* that wins in the spoken language. Folley and Hall (2003: 66) claim that in informal style we can use both forms of pronouns interchangeably. Their viewpoint is a kind of permission to break the prescriptive rule because if we use the two forms interchangeably, the distinction between *each other* and *one another* becomes blurred and is likely to disappear completely in the future. The practice shows that what Folley and Hall (2003: 66) propose might become true.

Some of the grammarians mentioned in this article do not even raise the issue of prescriptive tradition, which might be another argument against prescriptivism. Stuurman (1987) does not differentiate between *each other* and *one another* in terms of prescriptive rules. He puts forward his own theory, in which the type of relation between referents is important. Many sentences given by Stuurman (1987) violate the prescriptive tradition, but he can easily account for that, distinguishing between chain relations and true reciprocal relations.

Taking everything into consideration, we can draw the conclusion that although the prescriptive rule concerning the distribution of reciprocals has been very powerful, it seems to be more and more disobeyed in the English language. People tend to mix up the two pronouns, use them interchangeably, violating the prescriptive rule. The number of examples breaking the rule lets us suppose that this process will gain in strength in the future.

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DYSTRYBUCJA ZAIMKÓW RECYPROKALNYCH W JĘZYKU ANGIELSKIM  
W PERSPEKTYWIE PRESKRYPTYWNEJ

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł jest poświęcony dystrybucji zaimków recyprokalnych w języku angielskim. Autorka skupia się w szczególności na dystrybucji tych zaimków w świetle zasady preskryptywnej, mówiącej o tym, że zaimek *each other* powinien być używany w odniesieniu do dwóch osób lub rzeczy, natomiast zaimek *one another* w odniesieniu do podmiotów składających się z więcej niż dwóch osób lub przedmiotów. Analiza 400 zdań z *Korpusu Współczesnego Języka Angielskiego (Amerykańskiego)* pozwala wyciągnąć następujące wnioski: po pierwsze, zasada preskryptywna jest coraz częściej naruszana, co może doprowadzić do jej całkowitego zaniku w przyszłości. Po drugie, analiza wskazuje, że istnieje tendencja do używania obydwu zaimków wymiennie, co świadczy o tym, że tradycja preskryptywna traci na znaczeniu.

*Streściła Justyna Niezabitowska*

**Key words:** pronoun, reciprocal pronouns, each other, one another, prescriptivism.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zaimek, zaimki recyprokalne, each other, one another, preskryptywizm.