

Self-talk, or inner speech, has been discussed extensively by psychologists (McCarthy-Jones and Fernyhough, 2011), philosophers (Martínez-Manrique and Vicente, 2015) and more recently by linguists (Wiltschko, 2025). Literature on the topic commonly describes self-talk as a kind of 'inner dialogue', based on the idea that we can direct utterances at ourselves in the same way we can direct utterances at others (Vygotsky, 1986). In this talk, I examine the strength of this idea by looking at the function of self-addressed utterances: utterances that refer to the speaker through the use of names and pronouns.

The functions of self-talk have been extensively studied, and it has been shown to have positive effects in several areas including sports performance, public speaking and problem solving (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2011; Kross et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2021). One striking finding from this literature is that self-talk in the second or third person often has a more beneficial effect on performance compared to first-person self-talk (Hardy et al., 2019; Furman et al., 2020). An example of this would be saying "You can do it" to yourself instead of "I can do it" to motivate yourself.

I argue that the differences between these different forms of self-talk are best studied within Erving Goffman's participation framework, which describes the different roles that participants can occupy within a speech encounter (Goffman, 1981; Levinson, 1988). The framework distinguishes the different roles participants can occupy in a speech encounter, such as speaker, addressee, or overhearer, and allows us to analyse how self-talk can simulate different configurations of these roles. The idea is that second- and third-personal reference has a special role in evoking encounters with addressees, participants and overhearers. Using this general framework, I discuss existing explanations of non-first-person self-talk. The dominant explanation of these effects appeals to the concept of self-distancing: non-first-person self-talk promotes a more objective self-perspective (Kross et al., 2014). The self-distancing explanation has recently come under criticism from Rivadulla-Durró (2026), who offers her own 'prima facie' account of self-talk as an alternative. This is the idea that second- and third-person self-talk is implicitly associated with being addressed by others, creating the impression that someone else is making a claim about us. As evidence for her claim, she points out that this view is in line with research on mental imagery processing that shows similar associative effects (Holmes & Matthews, 2010).

Both accounts thus explain the performance benefits of self-address and self-reference in terms of a perspective shift, and both link grammatical person to interactional roles within a participation framework, differing only in how they assign those roles. However, in treating second and third person self-talk as instances of the same underlying mechanism, neither account predicts the structural asymmetry that a participation framework reveals: second and third persons occupy categorically distinct roles in conversation. On my account, self-directed utterances that contain addressing devices (e.g. imperatives, vocatives, second person pronouns) or third person reference evoke speech situations with multiple participants, this is shared by second and third person self-talk. The difference is that second personal address is used in order to directly motivate action and that third personal reference is used for self-evaluation. This distinction maps onto different participation configurations: second-person address constructs an addressee role that directly implicates the self as a target of directive speech, whereas third-person reference positions the self as a non-addressed participant, creating the evaluative distance characteristic of self-distancing effects. The current proposal echoes recent work on 'altercentric cognition', showing strong low-level influences on cognition of the present perspective of others (Kampis & Southgate, 2020). Similarly, private speech is both triggered by the presence of others

(McGonigle-Chalmers et al., 2014), and can be used to simulate the presence of others. Addressed self-talk may therefore function as a form of simulated social interaction, recruiting the same cognitive mechanisms activated by genuine interpersonal exchange. This suggests that private speech could facilitate both direct and indirect social influence, fostering social learning and later helping to internalise social norms.