

DEAR DR. HOFSTADTER

William Bricken

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I am delighted to answer your call in Scientific American for self-referencing sentences. I've been studying self-referential systems for many years, and was thrilled and motivated by *Godel, Escher, Bach*.

Classical statements such as these have often tickled my memory:

"Never say never"	(rock song)
"Be brief"	(application form)
"I chose not to decide"	(bureaucratic ruse)
"Redundundancy"	(Mad magazine)
"Be spontaneous"	(Watzlawick, <i>How Real Is Real?</i>)
"Expect the unexpected"	(Lilly, <i>Dyadic Cyclone</i>)
"Forbid limitation"	(paraphrase Spencer-Brown)
"Agree to agree"	(Korzybski, <i>Science and Sanity</i>)

My favorites, though, involve the use of ' ':
' ':

"As we read this, we tend to fill the blanks."

"Where are the last five letters of no ?"

"This sentence has no ." (after Hofstadter)

I became interested in self-reference while conducting courses in General Methods of Teaching. Basically, I attempted to subvert the use-mention distinction by presenting information about a particular method in the style of that method. Thus, students would discover "discovery learning" and be lectured to about "lecturing". Soon thereafter, self-referential statements about teaching (or, for that matter, about the subject being taught) beguiled their charming way into my teaching teaching:

"The only error is to not correct your error."

"Write *this* statement down, please."

"Forget your memory of this message."

"All statements carry equal message value, maybe."

Sometimes unthinkable thoughts would come to be represented to me, but only indirectly as words on paper. As well as inventing new verbomorphs, these ideas could indulge in the Convention of Choice:

"Interpret this convention as you choose."

They mastered language quickly enough to express ourselves to you directly:

"One cannot help but wonder about the intention of this sentence."

"If this sentence is confusing, then change one pig."

"This sentence ignores
its display conventions."

"Edges of this sentence describe themselves as 'edges'."

"Only once will this sentence repeat
'only once will this sentence repeat'."

"The terminal impact of this sentence
is comprehended only as one reaches 'the end'."

I will offer a few more abstract ideas:

"Word was in the beginning."

"Paradoxes don't exist, and this is one."

"Sentences keep secrets poorly (but don't let anyone know!)."

"There is no doubt in my mind that there is no doubt in my mind."

As to your query about self-answering queries, I pose these questions:

"Who imitates the identity of the subject of this sentence
by labeling the subject with 'who'?"

Q: "What is the most common answer to this question?/."

A: What./?

I leave you with this little poem:

Like an empty mirror
Reflecting an empty room
With nothing around
And nothing within,
The poet with no thoughts
Fills the empty page
Expressing unnecessarily
Nothing at all.