

Heavy reflexive middle markers? Reassessing reflexive middles in a theory of grammar.

Abstract

Reflexive markers exist in essentially two types. On the one hand, we find morphologically simplex (light, weak) markers such as Russian *–sja*, German *sich* and Spanish *se*. On the other hand, there are complex or heavy markers like Russian *sebjä*, English *x-self* or Mandarin *ziji*. Reinhart and Reuland (1993) use the terms SE-anaphors and SELF-anaphors to capture this distinction. König and Siemund (2005) show that heavy reflexives are often formally identical to *self*-intensifiers (e.g. *the king himself*).

Light and heavy reflexive markers possess different distributional profiles that are influenced by syntactic, semantic and also pragmatic factors. According to one prominent generalization, only light reflexives may appear as middle markers (Kemmer 1993; König and Siemund 2005; Steinbach 2002). In other words, heavy reflexives are not expected to acquire middle marking functions that essentially turn otherwise transitive predicates into intransitive ones, yielding a wide array of semantic distinctions often captured by labels such as ‘motion middle’, ‘facilitative’, ‘anticausative’, ‘quasi-passive’, and others (Haspelmath 1990; Kemmer 1993). This generalization is illustrated by the examples below where the (light) reflexive middle markers of German, Russian, Spanish and Swedish do not find a translational equivalent in English, which is a language with heavy reflexive markers:

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|-----|--|----------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|
| (1) | <i>Paul</i> | <i>setzte</i> | <i>sich</i> | <i>auf</i> | <i>den</i> | <i>Stuhl.</i> | German |
| | Paul | sat | REFL | on | the | chair | MOTION MIDDLE |
| | ‘Paul sat (himself) down on the chair.’ | | | | | | |
| (2) | <i>Dieses</i> | <i>Hemd</i> | <i>wäscht</i> | <i>sich</i> | <i>leicht.</i> | | German |
| | this | shirt | washes | REFL | easily | | FACILITATIVE |
| | ‘This shirt washes easily.’ | | | | | | |
| (3) | <i>Dver’</i> | <i>za</i> | <i>nej</i> | <i>zakryla-s.</i> | | | Russian |
| | door | behind | her | closed-REFL | | | ANTICAUSATIVE |
| | ‘The door closed behind her.’ | | | | | | |
| (4) | <i>Dörren</i> | <i>stäng-s</i> | <i>klockan</i> | <i>sju.</i> | | | Swedish |
| | door.the | close-REFL | clock | seven | | | QUASI-PASSIVE |
| | ‘The door is closed at seven o’clock. / The door closes at seven o’clock.’ | | | | | | |
| (5) | <i>Aquí</i> | <i>se</i> | <i>venden</i> | <i>coches</i> | <i>usados.</i> | | Spanish |
| | here | REFL | sell | cars | used | | PASSIVE |
| | ‘Used cars are sold here.’ | | | | | | |

In my presentation I will question the traditional generalization that only light or weak reflexives (e.g., German *sich*, Spanish *se*) appear as middle markers. Geniušienė (1987) already shows that English heavy reflexive markers appear in middle marking contexts. I here offer a fine-grained analysis of the form *itself* in contexts like those illustrated below.

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| (6) | AUTOCAUSATIVES/MOTION MIDDLES |
| | <i>Sometimes she’d turn on her heel, snarling, and lunge at a dog that had gradually edged over and <u>positioned itself</u> expectantly behind her.</i> |
| (7) | ANTICAUSATIVES/SPONTANEOUS |
| | <i>A groove of concern <u>chiseled itself</u> down the middle of Lancaster’s forehead.</i> |

- (8) FACILITATIVES
It [the heap of mail] sorted itself naturally into three piles: junk mail, bills and Ya-Ya letters of condolence.
- (9) QUASI-PASSIVES
Agnes peered inside the shapeless felt bag covered in black jet that styled itself a purse.

In languages other than English, too, heavy reflexive markers may appear in middle marking contexts, as illustrated by the examples from Arabic below. Similar phenomena are known to exist in Finnish, which is another language with heavy reflexives (*itse*).

- (10) Arabic (arabiCorpus)

<i>thamata</i>	<i>asilatun</i>	<i><u>tatrah</u></i>	<i><u>nafs-a-ha</u></i>	<i>min jadid</i>
there.are	questions	raise	REFL-ACC-POSS.F	again

'These questions raise themselves.'
- (11) Arabic (arabiCorpus)

<i>harakatuhu</i>	<i>lam</i>	<i><u>tuhaddid</u></i>	<i><u>nafs-a-ha</u></i>	<i>fi</i>	<i>hadaf</i>
involvement	NEG	define	REFL-ACC-POSS.F	in	goal

'His involvement did not define itself in terms of a goal.'

Based on an analysis of approximately 2000 examples drawn from the British National Corpus, I explore if and to what extent the English heavy reflexive *itself* can be found in such contexts. Moreover, I provide a typology of the middle situation types in which the form *itself* occurs and analyze the processes that give rise to the use of *itself* in such contexts. While some incipient grammaticalization processes can be found, I argue that *self*-intensification as well as various lexicalization processes need to be considered, too. I also provide an extensive quantitative analysis of the contexts in which *itself* occurs showing that the type and token frequencies of the verbs involved provide a very good diagnostics for differentiating these processes. I conclude that morphologically complex or heavy reflexives can occur as markers of middle situation types, contrary to widely accepted accounts. The reflexive marker *itself* begins to behave like a bound morpheme in these contexts. Moreover, I argue that the traditional grammaticalization account given for the occurrence of reflexive pronouns as markers of middle situation types is too simplistic and needs to be revised. The analysis of English *itself* will be complemented by a small-scale typological study.

References

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