

The intransitivization of English Reflexive constructions

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The development of reflexive markers into intransitivizers is universally attested (Kemmer, 1993), yet quite puzzling. How can an initially highly transitive construction (Keenan, 2002) end up indicating low transitivity? How can a marked coreference turn unmarked? My account for English offers an explanation for the grammaticization path involved.

Current English verbs + reflexive pronouns are syntactically transitive, but they often fail transitivity tests. Most reflexive pronouns in the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBC) cannot be conjoined (Caps indicate stress):

(1) ?? Somebody... was gonna SACRIFICE **themselves** and their CAREERS.

They cannot be stressed, focused or participate in a resultative construction either.

The idea is that an action performed on the self is hardly ever what would seem to be the same action performed on another. For example, 43/45 of the *cut* and *hurt oneself* examples in SBC and LSAC involve a nonvolitional act (e.g., *I cut myself shaving* – LSAC). Talking to, entertaining, or stopping another involve external actions. *Talking to*, *entertaining* and *stopping oneself* are internal, and involve no action. *Allowing* another is different from *allowing oneself* ('indulging oneself'). The list could go on. Reflexive clauses typically do not depict a transfer of activity from an agent to a distinct patient, the stereotypical (highly) transitive activity. All of these findings are in line with Hopper and Thompson's (1980) claim that reflexive constructions indicate an intermediate degree of transitivity. As such, the transitivity involved is not just lower than that of a transitive. It is also higher than that of an intransitive:

(2) It ((an electric tooth brush)) **danced itself** to the floor! (M.A. 12.14.2004).

Note that M.A is presenting the tooth brush as initiating the action (Cf. *it danced to the floor*).

My claim is that initially, lower transitivity interpretations constituted ad hoc pragmatic inferences interlocutors drew, based on speaker intentions and general knowledge about actions on the self. Recurrent uses of specific verbs gradually created collocational combinations which are not perfectly compositional in meaning. According to Shimizu and Murata (2004), over 29% of the 1927 transitive verb + reflexive combinations they extracted from the BNC received a special entry in the *Genius English-Japanese Dictionary*. This was not the case for verbs + pronouns, where the interpretation is compositional. While the particular interpretations are verb-specific, the general pattern is that of a lowered degree of transitivity.

Haiman (1998) emphasizes the usefulness of the construction for expressing a divided self, as in:

(3) You **ask yourself**, am I doing the right thing? (LSAC).

These are cases where coreference is quite unmarked, and the transitivity is particularly low (*ask oneself* actually means the intransitive 'wonder'). Once the lower transitivity interpretation, so often generated, is salient enough, it is reanalyzed as part of the reflexive construction.

Nevertheless, reflexives cannot occur in the *one's way* construction, restricted to intransitives:

- (4) He **behaved** (~??**himself**) **his way** to stardom (www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A24629-7.2.2004)

While semantically, the English reflexive construction indicates low transitivity, it has not yet become syntactically intransitive.

References

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