Will the real reflexive please stand up?

It is widely accepted in the study of reflexivity that there are two types of reflexive verbs: inherent and non-inherent verbs (Everaert 1986, Reinhart & Reuland 1993). An important distinction between the two types is productivity: non-inherent reflexive verbs can be formed from virtually any transitive verb, while inherent reflexive verbs can only be formed from a limited set of verbs. In many languages different strategies are employed to express the two types of reflexivity. In Dutch, for example, the pronoun *zich* (referred to as *SE-anaphor*) is used for inherent reflexive verbs (1a), while the pronoun *zichzelf* (referred to as *SELF-anaphor*) is used for non-inherent reflexive verbs (1b). Often, the non-inherent reflexive verbs have been called the *true reflexives*.

Another distinction between the two types is said to be the compositionality of their meanings (Grimshaw 1982, Wehrli 1986, Steinbach 2002, Dobrovie-Sorin 2005). According to this view inherent reflexive verbs historically started out as non-inherent reflexive verbs, a derivation of some transitive verb. Then, along the way, the verb acquired an idiomatic meaning for its reflexive use only, and consequently a new, obligatory reflexive verb entry was created in the lexicon. From the Dutch verb *schikken* ‘to arrange’, for example, a new verb *zich schikken* ‘to go along’ was created (2). Therefore, the conclusion would be that the difference between inherent and non-inherent reflexive verbs is that only inherent reflexive verbs evolved from a transitive verb into a separate verb entry.

A problem for this view are the so-called *grooming verbs*. Interestingly, grooming verbs involve verbs like *to wash*, which are often seen as the prototypical reflexives. Cross-linguistically these verbs pattern with both inherent and non-inherent reflexive verbs (Haspelmath 2003), cf. the Dutch grooming verb in (3) with (1a-b). A possible analysis is that these verbs have two forms, a transitive and an inherent reflexive form. However, even in the inherent reflexive form grooming verbs do not have an idiomatic meaning. This poses a problem for the view that inherent reflexive predicates are idiomatic. Because of this I will argue that inherent reflexive verbs are not by definition idiomatic expressions.

But if it is not the idiomatic meaning that distinguishes inherent reflexive verbs from non-inherent reflexive verbs, where does the distinction come from then? I will argue that the difference between the two types stems from a difference in argument structure (see Reinhart & Siloni 2004, 2005, de Alencar & Kelling 2005, Dobrovie-Sorin 2005, and Schäfer 2006 for discussion). In other words, inherent and non-inherent reflexive verbs differ from each other thematically. This analysis fits nicely with the other uses that SE-anaphors can have, (e.g. reciprocal, anticausative, middle and passive uses; see Kemmer 1993) which also differ thematically from non-inherent reflexive verbs. Moreover, I will use the analysis to shed some light on the nature of reflexivity.

Examples

(1) a. Jan schaamt zich/*zichzelf
   John shames SE    SE.self
   ‘John is ashamed’

   b. Jan haat *zich/*zichzelf
   John hates SE SE.self
   ‘John hates himself’
Stage 1:  *schikken* ‘to arrange’ (transitive verb, optionally reflexive)

Stage 2:  *schikken* ‘to arrange’ (transitive verb, optionally reflexive)

*zich schikken* ‘to go along’ (obligatory reflexive verb)

(3) Jan wast zich/zichzelf
John washes SE  SE.self
‘John washes himself’

References


