The emergence of English reflexive verbs: An analysis based on the Oxford English Dictionary

Abstract

Present-Day English is generally assumed to possess only a handful of lexicalized reflexive verbs (absent oneself from, pride oneself on, etc.) and to use reflexive pronouns neither for the marking of motion middles or the derivation of anticausative (decausative) verbs. Such middle uses of reflexive markers (non-argument reflexives) are widespread in other European languages. Based on corpus evidence, Geniušienė (1987), Peitsara (1997), and Siemund (2010) demonstrate that English reflexive pronouns do occur in the aforementioned contexts and offer extensive lists of the verbs involved. These findings run counter to a widely accepted generalization, according to which morphologically complex reflexives do not possess (or develop) middle uses (König and Siemund 2005; Steinbach 2002).

I here follow up the historical development of these verbs from Middle English to Present-Day English. My analysis is based on a survey of the relevant verb entries in the Oxford English Dictionary (222 verbs), complemented by an examination of the OED quotation base. My study shows that the number of reflexive verbs in English has gradually, but steadily, increased since complex reflexives (myself, yourself, etc.) emerged in Middle English. They often result from lexicalization processes, but the data also show more regular patterns indicative of grammatical processes. The Oxford English Dictionary proves a rich and highly valuable data source that can be used for serious linguistic analyses.


