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Types of ambiguity in reflexive constructions in German*

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1. Introduction

In German, ambiguity may arise in reflexive constructions which match the canonical pattern (with a transitive verb and an accusative pronominal object coreferential with the actor subject in nominative) if they contain a constituent which may describe a state, e.g. *schlau* 'clever'. In one reading, it pertains to a result/effect of the activity denoted by the verb. In another interpretation, it modifies the activity as a manner adverb, being optional and therefore omissible. In other words, reflexive clauses are unambiguous without such a constituent interpretable as a state description, e.g.:

- (1) a. *sich*¹ (*schnell*) *bewegen*
REFL.PRON quick(ly) move(TR):INF
'move (quickly/fast)'
b. *sich* *schlau* *bewegen*
REFL.PRON clever move(TR):INF
'move {i} smartly / ii) and make oneself clever (or: become/get clever)'

For (1b.ii) a constituent like *schlau* is indispensable. At first glance, the ambiguity in (1b) is simply due to the fact that adverbs are not formally differentiated from their adjective counterpart in German. In sections 2 and 4 below it is argued that this is not the decisive factor but example (1b) has two different logical structures depending on resultativity. For (1b.ii) a complex layered structure is assumed whereas (1b.i) groups together with (1a) as an activity expression, containing an omissible manner adverb.

- (1) a/b.i. *sich* (*{schlau / schnell}*) *bewegen*
REFL.PRON clever(ly) / quick(ly) move(TR):INF
'move ({smartly / fast})'

While the reflexivity in the sense of coreferentiality between the subject and the formal verb object is maintained in (1) independently of resultativity, (2b) is ambiguous as to the referential identity of the undergoer of the activity denoted by the verb:

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¹ The reflexive pronoun *sich* is formally identical for dative and accusative. All examples in this paper contain *sich* in accusative exclusively.

- (2) a. *sich* (intensiv) *pflügen*
 REFL.PRON intensive(ly) care.for:INF
 ‘care for oneself (intensively)’
 b. *sich kaputt pflügen*
 REFL.PRON destroyed care.for:INF
 ‘care for {i) oneself (e.g. body) / ii) someone else}
 and ruin oneself (i.e. the own health)’

In (2b), only a resultative interpretation is possible due to the meaning of *kaputt*, which accepts no usage as a manner adverb. The reflexive pronoun *sich* nevertheless corresponds to two different roles: In (2b.i) it is, in the canonical way, the undergoer of the event described by the verb and coreferential with the actor subject, whereas in (2b.ii) the referential identity of the verb object is not explicit, not being overtly expressed. Despite this difference and the apparent parallelism with (2a), the pattern in (2b.i) is to be accounted for, together with (2b.ii), as a complex layered structure analogously to (1b.ii). This will be shown in sections 3 and 4 below.

2. Analysis of ambiguous reflexives with constant undergoer assignment

The following sentence exemplifies the ambiguous pattern (1b).

- (3) *Beweg dich schlau!* (Felix Neureuther’s slogan)²
 move(TR):IMPER.2.SG PRON.2.SG.ACC clever(ly)
 ‘Move {i) smartly / ii) and make yourself clever} !’

For both readings the status of the reflexively used pronoun is apparently constant as the formal object of the verb. However, compare (3) with the following unambiguous cases.

- (4) a. *Lauf* ({ *schlau* / *schnell* }) !
 walk:IMPER.2.SG clever(ly) / quick(ly)
 ‘Walk/Run ({smartly / fast}) !’
 b. *Lauf dich {schlau / gesund} !*
 walk:IMPER.2.SG PRON.2.SG.ACC clever(ly) / healthy
 ‘Walk/Run and make yourself {clever / healthy} !’

For a resultative expression like (4b) a reflexively used pronoun in accusative is needed though *laufen* ‘walk, run’ as such is a monovalent intransitive verb. In other words, its valency is shifted to a quasi-transitive frame in order to express resultativity. Furthermore, (4b) is unacceptable without a complement constituent describing a state like *schlau* or *gesund* (i.e. **Lauf dich!*) in contrast to (4a), where it is omissible.³ Now, the reflexive construction *sich bewegen* ‘move (intr.)’ is a kind of derived intransitive with affinity to

² The title of his book, 2014 (Nymphenburger), as well as his education program since 2020 (<https://bewegdichschlau.com/>), which inspired me to the topic of this paper.

³ This perfectly parallels English resultative constructions with an intransitive verb such as *he ran himself breathless* as described by Halliday (1967: 73), *he talked himself hoarse (in/for ten minutes)* by Van Valin (1990: 254f.) and ... *Sam ... had coughed himself into a haemorrhage* by Rappaport Hovav and Levin (2001: 768).

the middle or the anticausative type though it completely fits the canonical transitive scheme with an accusative object.⁴ The phrase *sich bewegen* as a whole belongs to the same selectional class as *laufen*. If we replace *laufen* in (4) by *sich bewegen*, we encounter the following situation:

- (5) a. *Beweg dich ({ schlau / schnell }) !* $\approx$ (1a / b.i), (3.i)
 ‘Move ({smartly / fast}) !’
 b. **Beweg dich dich { schlau / gesund } !*

In (3.ii) and (5b) we observe a kind of haplological, but obligatory deletion of the same reflexively used pronoun. Possibly we might assume a ban on a twice (or more) occurrence of an identical pronoun (i.e. in the same case) with the same reference in a clause with one predicate, e.g. a verb. But which pronoun in (5b) is to be deleted? The one that belongs to the reflexive verb phrase or the one that corresponds to *dich* in (4b) with an intransitive verb? We will return to this question in section 4. So far, it is at least clarified that in (3) as well as in (1b), two structurally distinct clause types fall into the same shape superficially.

3. Analyses of ambiguous reflexives with and without object assignment shift

(2b) in section 1 was demonstrated as a case of a potentially ambiguous construction, though the following example, which coincides with the pattern in (2b), is not ambiguous because of the word *Angehörige* ‘relatives, family members’.

- (6) *dass sich einige Angehörige kaputtpflegen, ...*
 that(CONJ) REFL.PRON some:PL.NOM relative:PL.NOM destroyed.care.for:3PL.PRS
 ‘that some relatives make care works (for their family member(s)) and ruin
 themselves’ = ‘that some are caring for their relative(s) and ruin their own health’
 (*Migros Magazin* 23, 6.6.2011)

While *sich* in (6) does not stand for the object of the verb *pflegen* ‘care for’ and is constrained to the reading (2b.ii), example (7) corresponds to (2b.i).

⁴ Despite the structural transitivity of the clause with *bewegen* ‘move(TR)’, reflexively used pronouns such as *dich* in (3/5) as well as *sich* in (1) seldom replace a non-reflexive accusative object of *bewegen*, because it mostly does not take an animate undergoer as its object if the nominative subject represents a human actor as in (1/3/5). That the nominative subject corresponds to an agentive actor is a factor rather similar to the middle (cf. e.g. Arce-Arenales et al. 1994) than to the anticausative type, since the latter is usually accounted for as having an undergoer subject in nominative (cf. e.g. Kulikov 2011: 392). Nevertheless, they are tightly connected, as shown in the range of reflexive usages e.g. in German. For discussions on this topic in more detail, cf. e.g. Benveniste 1950, Halliday 1967: 42ff., Nedjalkov 1980, Haspelmath 1987, Kemmer 1994, Levin and Rappaport Hovav 2005: e.g. 2, Næss 2007: 31ff., esp. 82f., Malchukov 2015, Inglese 2022, cf. also Ono 2017: esp. 50f., 2024: esp. 144, and to appear, section 1.

- (7) *Man kann sich mit zu viel Kosmetika kaputt()pflegen.*⁵
 one:NOM can:3SG.PRS REFL.P. with too much cosmetics destroyed()care.for:INF
 ‘One can destroy one’s own health/beauty by caring with too much cosmetics.’

(7) conforms to the very canonical pattern of the reflexive construction in the narrower sense, where the actor coded as the nominative subject acts intentionally upon her-/himself represented by the reflexive pronoun in accusative. Therefore, nothing seems to demand an analysis presuming a complex structure analogous to (6). If, however, we adopt the same analytic procedure as for (1/3) with *bewegen* ‘move (tr.)’, (7) should have a logical structure similar to that of (1b.ii/3.ii) as well as (4b), i.e. a complex one, due to the neat parallelism between the patterns (2b.ii/7) and (1b.ii/3.ii).⁶

The next example, which is ambiguous, even fuzzy with regard to the identity of the undergoer corresponding to the verb object, may lead to a tenable analysis:

- (8) *Sie sticht sich reich. Tattoo-Queen G. tätowierte sich zu einem Vermögen von 10 Millionen Franken*
 she:NOM prick:3.SG.PRS REFL.PRON rich. tattoo:3.SG.PRT
 to INDEF.SG.DAT richness of millions francs
 lit. ‘She tattoos herself rich. Tattoo Queen G. tattooed herself to the income of 10 mio. CHF.’ (*Blick am Abend* 23.5.2016)

Interpretation 1: She tattooed herself; actually she has many tattoos on her body (in the photo attached to the article) (but her income therefore?)

Interpretation 2: She tattooed other people (customers)

Interpretation 3: For resultative reflexives it is not necessary to clarify the identity of the referent(s) of the verb object

The following examples with *trinken* ‘drink’, which has a transitive and an objectless (and in this sense: intransitive) usage parallel to *stechen* ‘prick’ in (8), give a suggestion for preference of interpretation 3:

- (9) a. *Sich mit Bier gesund trinken*
 REFL.PRON with beer healthy drink:INF
 lit. ‘drink oneself healthy with beer’ (20min. 27.4.2004)
 b. { i) *Bier* / ii) **Mit Bier* (a noun in acc. is necessary) / iii) **Sich* / iv) $\emptyset$ } *trinken*
 i) ‘drink beer’; iv) ‘drink’

(9) demonstrates an object-demoting effect of resultative reflexives, and in this sense they have an antipassivizing function.⁷ Hence, in (8) as well as in (7) the object of the verbs is

⁵ The parentheses with a space inside stand for a possible word border. They reflect that *kaputt* is considered to be an independent word in (2b), whereas it is treated in (6) as a component of a verb compound, at least orthographically.

⁶ Another possibility is to view *kaputtpflegen* as a verb compound analogous to e.g. *kaputtmachen* ‘destroy’, which has a simplex argument structure.

⁷ Cf. e.g. Nedjalkov 1980: e.g. 223, Van Valin 1980, Premper 2001: 489f., Kulikov 2011: 380ff., Malchukov 2015: esp. 114, Inglese 2022: 503ff., cf. also Ono 2024: 144.

absent, i.e.: *sich* in (7/8) does not represent the verb object corresponding to the undergoer of the activity denoted by the verb, in an analogous manner to (6).

4. Hypothesis on double reflexive deletion and logical structures of reflexives

We saw above that in resultative reflexives the expression of the verb object is suppressed, including a reflexivized object under the coreferentiality condition likewise. Therefore, the reflexive pronoun or a reflexively used pronoun in accusative does not belong to the clause with the given verb, mostly for Activity, but to the implied event leading to a resulting state (Accomplishment).⁸ Accordingly, the clauses under (2) are reanalysed as in (10), and analogously those under (1) as in (11):

- (10) (*jemanden* ‘someone (indef.acc.)’; *dadurch* ‘(by) doing so’; *machen* ‘make’):
- a. *sich* (ADV) *pflegen* = *sich pflegen* (+ e.g. *intensiv*)
 - b.i. *sich kaputt pflegen* = *sich pflegen* + *sich (dadurch) kaputt machen*
 - b.ii. *sich kaputt pflegen* = *jemanden pflegen* + *sich (dadurch) kaputt machen*
- ↓
- a'. *sich* (ADV) *pflegen* = *sich pflegen* (+ e.g. *intensiv*)
 - b'.i. *sich kaputt pflegen* = ~~*sich*~~ *pflegen* + *sich (dadurch) kaputt machen*
 - b'.ii. *sich kaputt pflegen* = ~~*jemanden*~~ *pflegen* + *sich (dadurch) kaputt machen*
- (11) a / b.i. *sich* (ADV) *bewegen* = *sich bewegen* (+ e.g. *schnell, schlau*)
- b.ii. *sich schlau bewegen* = ~~*sich*~~ *bewegen* + *sich (dadurch) schlau machen*

The superficially simplex reflexive construction as in (1b.ii), parallel to (2b.i), thus results from a causal chain of two subevents, and the reflexive marker is not governed by the given verb but conditioned by a general predicate on a higher layer like *make* or *bring to* which corresponds to CAUSE. Its logical structure may be analyzed as in (12):⁹

- (12) [**do'** (x_i , [**predicate'** (x_i , (y))])] CAUSE [BECOME/INGR **predicate'** (x_i , (z))]

y indicates that y , the second argument of a bivalent predicate, i.e. a transitive object in our case, may not appear overtly. y is in parentheses because of the possibility to have a monovalent intransitive verb for **predicate'** as in (4b) with *laufen* ‘walk, run’. If **predicate'** is a transitive verb, it allows an object coreferential with the agent x_i for y , but since y is never expressed overtly, consequently x_i in the position of y cannot occur, as demonstrated in (10/11). Taking account of this situation, (13) might be an alternative notation, under the condition that $\emptyset$ is understood properly in the above sense:

- (13) [**do'** (x_i , [**predicate'** (x_i , $\emptyset$)])] CAUSE [BECOME/INGR **predicate'** (x_i , (y))]

By contrast, the simplex reflexives without resultativity such as (1a / b.i) and (2a) include solely the part up to CAUSE, and y in (14) is realized by a pronoun for reflexivity standing for x_i :

⁸ For discussions on this topic cf. e.g. Van Valin 1990, 2005: 31ff., 2023: 95ff., Oswald 2021, cf. also Premper 2001: 482f.

⁹ Cf. e.g. Van Valin 1990: 254f., 2005: 42ff., 2023: 94ff., Oswald 2021.

(14) $\text{do}'(x_i, [\text{predicate}'(x_i, y)])$

5. Conclusions and perspectives

From a descriptive standpoint, we observe mainly two types of ambiguity in constructions which exhibit the canonical reflexive pattern with a reflexively used pronoun in accusative. The first type concerns the possibility of resultative and non-resultative reading which pertains to the change of state of the actor after her/his activity. For a resultative meaning, a reflexive clause needs a constituent capable of describing a state.¹⁰ Moreover, such a constituent must also be able to modify an activity as a manner adverb. Otherwise no ambiguity arises. The fact that adjectives and adverbs are formally not distinct in German is prerequisite, but not sufficient and decisive for ambiguity.

The second ambiguity type is restricted to the resultative reflexives and pertains to a shift in undergoer assignment. A shift has two correlating sides, namely, the perspective of the coding of the undergoer of the activity denoted by the verb, and simultaneously that of the role identity of the reflexively used pronoun. Is the undergoer identical with the referent of the pronoun? Conversely, does the role of the pronoun correspond to the undergoer of the activity? In other words, can the pronoun be the object of the verb semantically? If it is not the case, i.e. if the undergoer of the activity does not coincide with the referent of the pronoun, such an undergoer cannot be expressed overtly in the reflexive clause, and her/his/their identity is implicit and depends on the context, or vague. With this property, the resultative reflexives exhibit an antipassivizing effect.

From the analytic point of view, antipassivization suppressing the original verb object applies to any kind of the object, including a reflexivized one coreferential with the actor subject. Hence, resultative reflexives are all accounted for as having a complex structure with the CAUSE component, even if the surface construction perfectly fits the canonical simplex reflexive pattern. The obligatory clause constituent expressing the resulting state of the actor corresponds to a predicate of the logical structure accompanied by BECOME or INGRESSIVE after CAUSE, and this matches its treatment as secondary predication in some approaches (cf. e.g. Ono 2024).

In Section 3 above we encountered some fuzzy cases, either that vagueness rather than ambiguity is observed, or that the simplex–complex distinction depends on lexical treatment of the constituent for state description, sometimes quite arbitrarily in the form of orthographical decisions. The fuzziness arises particularly when an expression for a state or an endpoint does not seem to exclude an adverbial usage (e.g. *zu Tode* ‘to death’), or when an obligatory constituent apparently expresses duration without an end term, or when reflexive verb phrases show a higher degree of middle type characteristics (cf. Ono 2024: 137ff. and to appear). Actually, we have to deal with many continuous phenomena, for which it is presumably not always adequate to assume discrete categorial structures as proposed in section 4 (cf. Seiler et al. 2021). Thus, we have much more to study and to analyze, though I hope to have contributed to clarify a couple of tricky cases in this paper.

¹⁰ Or a telic expression analogous to *into a haemorrhage* in footnote 3 and *zu einem Vermögen* ‘to richness’ in example (8), though this type is not discussed in this paper.

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