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## The Semantics of the Reflexive Pronoun Constructions

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### Abstract

Meanings that occur in the reflexive constructions (verb + reflexive *sebya* 'self') are considered in the paper on the basis of verbs of motion, mental, emotional and speech verbs. "Ordinary" pronouns do not initiate changes in meaning, but reflexive ones, on the contrary, can do it. Verbs of physical action in their initial meanings have two options for a dependent noun phrase. For verbs of speech, felicity conditions change in the reflexive context.

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### 1. Introduction

The main function of the reflexive pronoun *sebya* ('self') is to mark the coreference of one of the participants of the situation with the subject, cf.: *Natasha [X] smeared Margarita [Y] with cream* vs. *Natasha [X] smeared herself [X] with cream*.

It is believed that the use of a pronoun (including reflexive) instead of a noun does not entail semantic changes. However, the reflexive pronoun *sebya* ('self') occupies a special position, and differs significantly from other substantive pronouns. For instance, there are combinations "verb + reflexive *sebya* 'self'", cf.:

*ushchipnut' sebya* 'to pinch oneself'; *oblit' sebya kholodnoy vodoy* 'to pour cold water over oneself'; *namazat' sebya kremom* 'to smear oneself with cream', *podvinut' chashku k sebe* 'to move the cup to oneself', *zakazat' sebe uzhin* 'to order a dinner for oneself'

These are considered free combinations. The reflexive *sebya* 'self' denotes coreference with the subject. But it

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does not cause any semantic changes in the verb or in the construction in general, cf.:

*Ya ostorozhno nakryla yeyo pledom* ‘I carefully **covered her** with a plaid’;

*Ona nakryla sebya chekhkami s kresel, chtoby ne teryat' teplo.* ‘She **covered herself** with chair covers to keep warm’.

There are also fully idiomatic combinations that could be found in the dictionary, cf.: *vyyti iz sebya* ‘to be beside oneself; to lose one’s temper; to fly into a rage’. In this paper we want to show that the real situation is much more complicated:

reflexives affect interpretations of the constructions to varying extents;

the reflexive pronoun shows that changes take place within verbs, the semantics of verbs are also changed in accordance with the changing situations;

the reflexive pronoun may be the only possible complement of verbs. If the meaning is only manifested through reflexive constructions they become idiomatic. The majority of such phrases are not found in dictionaries – only “obvious” idioms could be found, cf. *priyti v sebya* ‘to come to one’s senses’, *vzyat' sebya v ruki* ‘to gather oneself; to pull oneself together’;

between the two extremes – free combinations and idioms – there is a large number of systemic verbal meanings that are at different stages of idiomatization.

In this paper we will only consider sentences with personal subjects (cf. *Zhenshchina prizhala k sebe rebenka* ‘The woman snuggled the baby to herself’), but this paper will not discuss examples with impersonal subjects (cf. *Eksponat privilekayet k sebe vnimaniye posetiteley* ‘Exhibit attracts the attention of visitors’); we will only consider verb constructions (“verb + reflexive *sebya*”).

## 2. Figurative meanings of physical action verbs

Let us consider causative verbs denoting objects in motion (approach-removal). They have three arguments – subject X (agence), object Y (patient) and landmark Z:

*X pridvinul Y k Z* ‘X (=Subject) moved up something (Y= Object) to something (Z= Landmark)’;

*X priblizil Y k Z* ‘X brought something (Y) closer to something (Z)’;

*X prizhal Y k Z* ‘X pressed something (Y) to something (Z)’.

Reflexive pronouns can refer to landmarks.

In the initial meaning corresponding to the physical situation, a landmark may be expressed both by a noun and by a reflexive pronoun, i.e. a landmark may be an alternative coreferent or non-coreferent:

*Borets prizhal protivnika k kovru– Mat' prizhala rebenka k sebe*

‘The wrestler **pressed** his opponent **to the mat**’ – ‘The mother **pressed** the baby **to herself**’;

*On pridvinul stul k stene– On pridvinul stul k sebe*

‘He **moved** the chair **closer to the wall**’ – ‘He **moved** the chair **closer to himself**’;

*On priblizil litso k steklu– On priblizil k sebe svechu*

‘He **brought** his face **closer to the glass**’ – ‘He **brought** a candle **closer to himself**’;

*On ottolknul rebenka ot kraya obryva– On ottolknul protivnika ot sebya*

‘He **pushed away** the baby **from the brink**’ – ‘He **pushed away** the opponent **from himself**’.

However, landmarks can only be expressed by a reflexive pronoun in some figurative meanings. For example, in one of the metaphorical meanings of the verb *priblizit* ‘bring closer’ the landmark can only be expressed by a coreferent:

*Posle voyny Stalin priblizil k sebe leningradskuyu gruppu* [Science and Life», 2008] ‘After the war, Stalin brought the Leningrad group closer to himself’.

Cf. also: *Imperatritsa priblizila k sebe favorite* ‘The Empress brought the favorite closer to herself’, but: *\*Kantsler priblizil favorita k imperatritse* ‘The Chancellor brought the favorite closer to the Empress’.

Cf. also the verb *gnat* ‘(to drive away; to chase away) with a personal object and one’s landmark can be designated by the coreferent *Mat' gonitmenya ot vzroslykh* [Andrey Belyy] ‘Mother drives me away from adults’, as non-coreferent: *Goniteot sebya plokhikh lyudey* ‘Drive away the bad people from yourself’.

However, the coreferent’s landmark may only be used in the context of the mental object (thoughts, fears, hopes, etc.): *gonite ot sebya eti mrachnyye mysli / strakh* ‘drive away / chase away those dark thoughts / fears from yourself’. For example, you can throw a dog away from both yourself and from the porch, but you can only throw away dark thoughts from yourself.

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