Virtual Reflexive Constructions: Diathesis alternations that distinguish themselves

Virtual reflexive constructions as exemplified in (1) form a unique class among English patient-subject constructions. Nevertheless, previous research on this topic has not fully appreciated the semantic factors differentiating this construction from that illustrated in (2), referred to as lexical reflexive construction, and from the middle construction (6b, 7c). Two reasons for this oversight are confusion regarding which phenomena the virtual reflexive construction encompasses and ambiguity surrounding the semantic properties of this construction. While addressing these issues, this paper explores the nature of agent demotion in virtual reflexive constructions and the role the demoted agent plays in clarifying semantic distinctions between this and other diathesis alternations.

Virtual and lexical reflexive constructions are often confused or assumed to be identical. This work expands previous analyses (e.g., Hale & Keyser 1987, Fellbaum 1989, and Levin 1993) by motivating the division between these two constructions structurally and semantically and suggesting diagnostic tests for the classification of both constructions. For example, one key distinction between virtual and lexical reflexive constructions is that the latter describes an inchoative event (Geniušiené 1987), while the former requires agentive involvement. Although the presence of the demoted agent in virtual reflexive constructions has been a matter of debate, attested data compiled for this investigation demonstrate that these constructions license the agentive phrase in the hands of (3), whereas expressing agenthood in lexical reflexive constructions is inconceivable (4). This finding reveals that the agent is entirely disjoint from the patient (contra Fellbaum 1989) and present in the lexical conceptual structure of verbs in virtual reflexive constructions (contra Hale & Keyser 1987). Understanding that agentivity distinguishes virtual from lexical reflexives allows for a coherent interpretation of each construction (5).

Having established the presence of an agent in virtual reflexive constructions, the question arises as to how virtual reflexives differ from middles, which are also regarded as patient-subject constructions involving a typically unexpressed agent. The two constructions are also semantically similar. Among other factors, both incorporate the notion of “ease of accomplishment” (cf. 5a & 6). Despite similarities, however, these constructions call for distinct analyses. The attested data reveal, for example, that agents in virtual reflexive constructions, but not middle constructions, are required to assume a performance role (7). Thus, creation verbs (compose, draw, write), of which performance verbs are members (Levin 1993), tend to be acceptable in virtual reflexives (contra Fellbaum 1989), while they are unacceptable in middles (Fellbaum & Zirbi-Hertz 1989). Moreover, middle constructions, not restricted to a performance interpretation, allow change of state verbs (break, burn, open), where virtual reflexive constructions generally reject this verb class. Considering such lexical differences between these two constructions sheds light on the semantic restrictions of agent demotion in both diathesis alternations.

While semantic properties clearly distinguish the three patient-subject constructions discussed here, the possibility of an overt agent argument in virtual reflexives and middles through the licensing of agentive prepositional phrases (see Stroik’s 1992, 1999 analysis of for-phrases in middles) supports an NP-movement analysis for both of these constructions (contra analyses such as Fellbaum 1989 and Ackerma & Schoorlemmer 1995). The properties of virtual reflexive constructions determined in this work provide meaningful and new motivation for a movement-based theory of agent demotion in patient-subject constructions.
Examples

1) a. This book (just) sells itself.
   b. The problem (practically) solved itself.
   c. These jokes (virtually) write themselves.

2) a. The idea suggested itself.
   b. The opportunity presented itself.
   c. His impatience manifested itself.

3) a. Coward is a playwright who writes brilliant dialogue that simply plays itself in
   the hands of competent actors.
   b. Philippine cinema is alive and well, reinventing itself in the hands of new
   directors.
   c. Once this was done, the commercial practically cut itself in the expert hands of
   Bill Dewald.

4) a. The idea suggested itself (*in the hands of the professor).
   b. His impatience manifested itself (*by Alxender).
   c. The opportunity presented itself (*for Anne).

5) a. Interpretation of virtual reflexive constructions: The quality of the patient is
   so felicitous to the achievement of the action denoted by the verb that agent
   encounters little difficulty in performing the action (cf. Lakoff 1977:252).
   b. Interpretation of lexical reflexive constructions: The event denoted by the
   verb occurred (spontaneously) with little or no help from an outside source.

6) a. This book sells itself.
   b. This book sells easily.

7) a. These jokes write themselves. (performance)
   b. *These jokes write easily.
   c. This wood burns easily. (non-performance)
   d. *This wood burns itself.

References

26:173-197.

Fellbaum, C. 1989. On the “Reflexive Middle” in English. Chicago Linguistic Society

Fellbaum, C., & A. Zribi-Hertz. 1989. The middle construction in French and English: A
comparative study of its syntax and semantics. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana
University Linguistic Club Publications.


10:1-36.

Levin, B. 1993. English verb classes and alternations: A preliminary investigation. Chicago:
University of Chicago Press.
