REFLEXIVITY IN OLD ENGLISH

Abstract

The paper discusses changes that took place in the ways of expressing reflexivity in Old English. The study examines and evaluates the two most common forms conveying reflexivity: the use of personal pronouns and the reflexive pronoun *self*. The Early Old English personal pronouns were able to convey a reflexive relation, but, probably in order to avoid ambiguity, the personal pronoun began to be accompanied by the pronoun *self* in sentences rendering a reflexive meaning. The paper also contains an account of *self* used on its own, which was mostly employed in structures with emphatic meanings. Moreover, the work will adduce an example of an Old English inherently reflexive verb. The data come from the Dictionary of Old English corpus.

1. Introductory

Modern English distinguishes itself from other Germanic languages as regards the way it expresses reflexivity and intensification. First, it has no morphologically simple reflexive pronouns, such as Ger. *sich* or Pol. *się*. Second, it employs the same -*self* form as an intensifier and reflexive anaphor. Yet, unlike Middle English, Old English had no special reflexive anaphor, which is not so uncommon within the family of Germanic languages. For instance, “Frisian does not have a special form for the reflexive pronoun of the third person singular. The personal *him* ‘him’ and *har* ‘her’ can function as a non-reflexive or reflexive pronoun” (cf. Hoekstra et al. 2010: 256). The same can be said about reflexivity in Old English, where mainly personal pronouns were employed to convey a reflexive relation. However, as will be shown, some of such constructions were ambiguous, which probably was the reason for the emergence of another way of expressing reflexivity, i.e. the
personal pronoun accompanied by the -self form. According to Penning (1875: 12) the main reason for personal pronouns being followed by self was the fact that there existed no difference between the third person pronoun expressing a reflexive relation and the third person pronoun referring to a third person. The present study will also demonstrate two different structures in which OE self was used as an intensifier: self following genitive, dative and accusative objects, and the pronoun standing in isolation. According to Mitchell (1985: 116) self used on its own can be reflexive. Yet, all the instances of isolated self presented in this paper play the role of the intensifier. The paper will also demonstrate an example of inherently reflexive verbs; verbs which do not require the presence of the pronoun self in order to render reflexivity. The study is based on texts from the DOE corpus and the numbers of lines of the presented examples correspond to the numbers given in the corpus. The translations from Aelfric’s *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church* are taken from Thorpe (1844). If not stated otherwise, all the remaining examples are translated by the author of this paper.

2. Intensifier self

The Old English intensifier self, which is an adjective and manifests agreement with its antecedent in number, gender and case, is used in adnominal and adverbial positions. When used adnominally, as shown in (1) and (2), the intensifier usually stands next to individuals of great importance, such as God, Christ or Moses (cf. Farr 1905: 19):

(1) (a) Swa swa crist sylf cwæð (…) (*ÆCHom* I, 2, 196.199)
    ['As Christ himself said.‘]
    (b) God gefylð þa hingrigendan mid his goodum. swa swa he sylf cwæð.
        (*ÆCHom* I, 13, 288.199)
    ['God filleth the hungry with his good things; as he himself said.’]

In (1), the self form directly accompanies the subjects it refers to. This structure was the primary way to express intensification in Early Old English. For instance, in *Beowulf* the intensifier self always precedes or follows the noun it modifies:

(2) (…) wolde self cyning symbel þicgan. (*Beowulf*, l.1010)
    ['The king himself would take part in the feast.’]

The Old English intensifier self is usually employed to modify the third person singular pronouns not only in *Beowulf* but also in later manuscripts, such as Ælfric’s *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon church* and *Lives of Saints*. Maybe less common, there are also other examples of nominative uses of
personal pronouns emphasized by *self*. For instance, in item (3), emphatic *self* is used with the first person nominative pronouns in the singular and the plural:

(3) (a) *Ic sylf* wylle gadrian mine sceþ þe wæron tostencte. (*ÆCHom* I, 17, 315.64)
    ['I myself will gather my sheep that were scattered.'][/n]
    (b) *Nu we seolfe* geseoð sigores taken (...) (*Elene*, l.1119)
    ['Now, we ourselves behold the sign of victory.'][/n]

By Late Old English another structure expressing intensification had appeared: the intensifier *self* modifying the genitive, dative and accusative objects. Of course, this structure did not outnumber *self* being used after nominative pronouns, but it still can be found in Old English manuscripts:

(4) (a) (...) *nu ic me sylf* ne mæg (...) (*Exeter book, Resignation*, l.96)
    ['Now that I myself may not.'][/n]
    (b) *beoð eow sylfe* nu gearwe to gewendenne to Criste (...) (*ÆLS (Thomas)*, l.169)
    ['Now you yourselves are prepared to turn to Christ.'][/n]
    (c) þæt *he him seolf* ær getimbrade (*Bede* 208, 14; cf. van Gelderen 2000: 32)
    ['that he himself had built for himself.'][/n]

In (4), *self* is used as an intensifier and, unlike the *self* forms in the items (1)-(3), it is accompanied by the dative forms of personal pronouns. As will be shown later, already in Old English the reflexive *self* could have an identical form.

As presented, *self* can intensify the noun and the personal pronoun. Yet, it can also function as a replacement for a previously used subject (cf. Ogura 1998: 149–150):

(5) (...) þæt *þu þa beorhtan us sunnan onsende, ond þe sylf cyme* (...) (*Exeter book, Christ A,B,C*, l.109)
    ['that you yourself send us the shining sun, and yourself come'][/n]

To summarize briefly, the vast majority of the use of the intensifier *self* in Old English occurs in sentences with the third person nominative pronouns. Maybe less numerous, there are also examples of the intensifier used with the first and the second person pronouns. The least common structures used emphatically are the intensifier added to the object pronoun and the intensifier used in place of the subject.
3. Reflexive use of personal pronoun

Before discussing the way Old English used to express a reflexive meaning, it is worth defining what reflexive verbs are. Generally speaking, reflexivity can be understood as the marking of co-reference of the subject and the object. In such constructions, reflexive pronouns are objects of verbs indicating co-reference with the subject or the complements of prepositional phrases. Therefore, a prototypical reflexive situation is believed to be one where “a participant acts on himself or herself, rather than on any other” (Lichtenberk 1994: 3504). Still, there are some reflexive verbs that have no object. This group of verbs are called inherently reflexive verbs; usually intransitive, these verbs can express reflexivity. In modern English the reflexive personal pronoun is obligatory only for the sake of clarity (e.g. shaved oneself) or when its usage has conventionalized into a particular meaning (e.g. help oneself). Already in Old English, some reflexive verbs did not require reflexive marking; cf. Peitsara (1997: 278), who claims that “many verbs that from the present-day point of view are intransitive may in early English be connected to coreferential pronouns, which needed otherwise be interpreted as objects of the action”:

(6) (a) (...) ond he hine ðær hwile reste (...) (Dream of the Rood, l.63)
   ['and he rested himself there for a while.‘]
(b) he gereste hine on ðone seofoðan dæg. (Genesis 2.2; cf. Siemund 2000: 30)
   ['He rested on the seventh day.’]
(c) Reste he ðær mæte weorode. (Dream of the Rood, l.69)
   ['He rested there with few warriors.’]

In this paper the main focus will be on reflexive verbs accompanied by the object being the personal pronoun used on its own or accompanied by the self form.

The primary way to express reflexivity is the use of personal pronouns. The Old English reflexive pronouns are used in almost all cases. For the first and the second person singular the most common pronouns employed in reflexive relations are the dative forms me and þe. The special accusative mec “does not function reflexively since it is becoming extinct” (van Gelderen 2000: 33). Yet, there is also the accusative þec with a reflexive meaning:

(7) (...) cen þec mid cræfte. (Beowulf, l.1215)
   ['prove yourself with strength.’]

Maybe not as common as the singular dative and accusative cases of pronouns, there are also the first and the second person dual and plural
pronouns rendering a reflexive meaning. For example, the first and the second person plural pronouns *us* and *eow* in Ælfric, the second person dual pronoun *incit* in *Genesis* and the first person dual *unc* in *Beowulf* serve for reflexive constructions:

(8) (a) *We sculon us gearcian* (...) (*ÆCHom* I, 11, 273.196)  
[‘We should make ourselves ready.’]
(b) *Bicgað eow pællene cyrtlas.* (*ÆCHom* I, 4, 209.95)  
[‘Buy yourselves costly kirtles.’]
(c) *Ne ceara incit dúguða* (*Genesis*, l.2733; cf. Visser 1963: 425, van Gelderen 2000: 45)  
[‘Care not to go forth from this land.’]
(d) * wit unc wiþ hronfixas/werian þohton* (*Beowulf*, l.540; cf. van Gelderen 2000: 35)  
[‘We hope to guard ourselves against the whales.’]

Most Germanic and Latin-derived languages, as Penning (1875: 2) states, possess a special form to render a reflexive meaning for the third person. For instance, Gothic for the third person has the reflexive pronoun *sik*, *sis* and *seina*, in accusative, dative and genitive case respectively. The English language, however, does not have an equivalent for the Latin pronominal form *se*. Therefore, in Old English, the third person pronoun has to be used in reflexive constructions in the same way as the first and second person pronouns:

(9) *for dán þe he hine ætbræd þam flæslicum lustum.* (*ÆCHom* I, 4, 206.13)  
[‘because he had withdrawn himself from fleshly lusts.’]

In Old English, the third person pronouns (*him*, *hine/hyne*, *hire/hyre*, *hi/ly* and *hit*) constitute the largest group of personal pronouns rendering a reflexive meaning. The most common pronoun within the group is the accusative *hine/hyne*. The pronoun *him* can be used as the singular masculine dative, plural dative and the dative of the neuter gender. The pronoun used as the plural dative and the singular neuter gender is not used in reflexive constructions in Anglo-Saxon literature. As Penning (1875: 9) contends “[t]he dative of the neutral gender (*him*) is not used as a reflexive pronoun”. Yet *him*, being masculine singular, can be used as a reflexive pronoun “when the verb assigns a dative Case to its object” (van Gelderen 2000: 36):

(10) *Gif he mid þam gewitendlicum gestreonum beceapað him þæt ece lif.*  
(*ÆCHom* I, 13, 288.205)  
[‘If he with those transitory treasures buy for himself eternal life.’]
Less frequent, although found in Old English manuscripts, are the reflexive uses of other third person pronouns, such as the feminine singular dative and plural accusative pronouns hire/hyre and hi/hy:

(11) (a) Sum **heo hire** on handum bær (...) *(Genesis, l.636; cf. Penning, 1875: 9)*
    ['Some (apples) she carried in hands.]
(b) þæt ða aglæcean **hy** eft gemetton that the fierce-enemies them again meet *(Beowulf, l.2591–2592; cf. van Gelderen 2000: 36)*
    ['that the fierce enemies met each other again.‘]

Besides rendering a reflexive interpretation, personal pronouns could refer to some other referents. The referent of the first and second person pronouns could be easily determined and the meaning they rendered could not have a double reading. Yet, the third person pronouns could be understood in two ways: they could anaphorically refer to the subject or to some other referents:

(12) **hine he** bewera D mid wæpnum *(ÆGram 96.11; cf. Siemund 2003: 484)*
    ['He defended himself/him with weapons.‘]

In (12), the sentence can be ambiguous and this kind of vagueness could be the cause of developing a new way to convey a reflexive meaning: the intensifier *self* attached to an object pronoun.

The last and the most infrequent way to render a reflexive meaning is the use of *self* without a personal pronoun. *Self* used alone is usually employed in a structure with an emphatic meaning. In *Beowulf*, a reflexive *self* is used on its own in the following expressions:

(13) (a) (...) Biowulf com **sylfes** cræfte (...) *(Beowulf, l.2359)*
    ['Beowulf came using his own strength.‘]
(b) (...) ealle ofercomon, **selfes** mihtum. *(Beowulf, l.696)*
    ['all overcome by his own might.‘]
(c) (...) þæt he beahhordes brucan moste **selfes** dome (...) *(Beowulf, l.893)*
    ['that he could enjoy the treasure at will.‘]

All the uses of *self* in (13) are rather emphatic than reflexive, for they emphasize the presence of only one participant in given actions and thereby exclude other potential contributors. For instance, in (13a), Beowulf was able to flee just owing to his own strength.

As Penning (1875: 16) maintains, this construction was not really common in Anglo-Saxon and occurred “mostly in such cases in which
possessive genitive comes in question; they are generally fixed expressions or settled phrases like: sylfes villum, sylfes mihtum, sylfes dome”.

*Self*, as presented, can stand alone in a sentence. Yet, in can be added to the OE adverb *willes*. Here, similarly to the examples in (13), it is a fixed expression with an emphatic meaning:

(14) (a) (...) and þrowade deað *sylfwilles* (*ÆCHom* I, 9, 256.237)  
[‘and voluntarily suffered death.’]
(b) Dyslic bið þæt man *sylfwilles* to rode gealgan efste. & hine sylfne to tintregum asende. (*ÆCHom*, I, 38, 516.256)  
[‘It is foolish that a man should hurry wilfully to the cross, and send himself to torments.’]

To recapitulate, the primary way to convey a reflexive meaning in Old English is the personal pronoun being either an object indicating co-reference with the subject or with the complements of prepositional phrases. The most common of all the reflexively used pronouns are the third person pronouns. The reflexive constructions with the third person pronoun had a double reading. Therefore, probably in order to distinguish between the markers of co-reference and disjoint reference, English had to employ a new way to render reflexivity. That could give rise to a specialized reflexive, *self*.

4. Reflexive *self*

As already mentioned, in order to avoid ambiguity, in sentences having a reflexive interpretation, the third person pronouns began to be used with the intensifier *self*. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the only reflexive *self* in *Beowulf* is added to the third person pronoun *he* (van Gelderen 2000: 39):

(15) (...) þæt he hyne *sylfne* gewræc (...) (*Beowulf*, l.2873)  
[‘that he avenged himself.’]

In the Junius MS, *self* chiefly plays the role of an intensifier. Penning (1875: 13) indicates only one example of reflexive *self* (16a), Visser (1963: 420) mentions two examples (16a, 16b), whereas van Gelderen (2000: 47) suggests that also *self* in item (16c) can be seen as having a reflexive meaning:

(16) (a) heht hie bringan to *him selfum* (*Genesis*, l.2628)  
[‘ordered (them) to bring her to himself.’]
(b) Nu ic þæs tacen wege sweotol on *me selfum* (*Genesis*, l.885)  
[‘Now I clearly bear the token upon myself.’]
(c) Sittan læte ic hine wið me sylfne (Genesis, l.438)
    ['I will let him sit with myself.]

In (16), the reflexive pronoun self, apart from the third person pronoun him, follows the first person pronoun me. The extension of self marking to the first and later to the second person, could happen by analogy. As Penning writes (1875: 13), “from the third person this usage was naturally transferred to the first and second persons”.

In the Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church by Ælfric, self is regularly added to a reflexively used pronoun. In Ælfric, as in other Old English manuscripts, the most common reflexive pronouns are third person pronouns:

(17) He cwæð gif ge forgifðæ, eow bið forgyfen. Ne bepæce nan man hine sylfne. (ÆCHom I, 3, 203.140)
    ['He said, “If ye forgive, ye shall be forgiven”. Let no man deceive himself.’]

In (17), the self form is added to a pronoun being in a direct object position. Yet, in Old English, as in Modern English self forms, the reflexive personal pronoun can be placed in the prepositional object position:

(18) (a) þæt is se fæder & his wisdom of him sylfum æfre acenned. (ÆCHom I, 1, 179.16)
    ['that is, the Father and his wisdom of himself ever produced.’]

(b) forðan þe God Fæder is on heofonum, and he is æghwar, swa swa he sylf cwæð, “Ic gefylle mid me sylfum heofonas and eorðan”. (ÆCHom I, 19, 327.55)
    ['for God the Father is in heaven, and he is everywhere, as he himself said, “I fill with myself heaven and earth”.’]

Apart from the third person pronouns, being either direct or prepositional objects, the new specialized reflexive pronoun can also accompany first and second person pronouns in the singular and the plural:

(19) (a) Ic offrie me sylfne þam ælmihtigum gode on bræðe wynsumnyssse. (ÆCHom I, 29, 425.210)
    ['I will offer myself to the Almighty God, in the odour of pleasantness.’]

(b) þæt we us sylfe clæne & ungewemmede him gegearcian. to blisse & ecere myrhœ (ÆCHom I, 2, 193.101)
    ['that we may prepare ourselves for him pure and uncorrupted in bliss and everlasting joy.’]

(c) Cyð þe sylfne (...) (Andreas, l.1212)
    ['Reveal yourself.’]
In short, in Old English *self* played two roles. First, it was a modifier expressing intensification. Second, it became a specialized form marking coreference between the subject and the objects. In *Beowulf*, the reflexive *self* occurs only once. By Late Old English, however, this way of marking reflexivity had not been infrequent.

5. Conclusions

In Old English the majority of reflexive constructions are expressed by means of personal pronouns but by late Old English another structure rendering a reflexive relation had appeared: the reflexive *self* modifying genitive, dative and accusative objects. The monomorphemic *self* chiefly serves the role of an intensifier. Yet, already in *Beowulf*, there is one instance of *self* having a reflexive meaning. In this example, *self* is added to the third personal pronoun *hyne*. The cause of the reinforcement of the third person pronoun with *self* could be the way to disambiguate otherwise ambiguous object pronouns. In later works, the *self* forms are still mostly emphatic and simple pronouns are still employed to express reflexive relations. But as compared with *Beowulf* and the Junius MS, *self* in later manuscripts becomes a meaningful part of reflexive relations. Another issue worth mentioning is that already in Old English the intensifier *self* and the reflexive *self* could have the same construction: both could be added to the object pronoun.

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