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The Semantic Coercion and Generative Mechanism in English "V + Oneself" Reflexive Constructions

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Abstract: This paper delves into the semantic coercion and generative mechanisms behind the "Verb + Oneself" reflexive constructions in English. Grounded in Lakoff's theory of the Subject-Self Metaphor and metonymy, the study classifies these reflexive constructions into four distinct categories, each based on verb semantics and the agent-patient relationship inherent in the verb phrase. By analyzing the interplay between verbs and reflexive pronouns, the research uncovers how reflexive pronouns, traditionally used to denote self-reference, can enable non-causative verbs to assume causative meanings through the process of semantic coercion. This phenomenon challenges the conventional understanding of verb argument structure, demonstrating how verbs that were once unable to take direct objects are now able to combine with reflexive pronouns, thereby transforming their syntactic and semantic functions. Through this analysis, the paper not only enriches the theoretical understanding of reflexive constructions but also offers insights into the dynamic nature of verb usage and its capacity to expand and adapt through semantic change. The findings contribute to a more nuanced view of how reflexive constructions interact with verb meaning, thereby enhancing our understanding of linguistic flexibility and evolution.

Keywords: reflexive construction; semantic coercion; subject-self metaphor; causative meaning

1. Introduction

1.1. Brief Review of Related Studies

Reflexive pronouns in both English and Chinese have long been a central focus in linguistic research. Scholars have explored various aspects of reflexive pronouns, including syntax, discourse function, morphology, and their grammatical roles. Some researchers have specifically investigated how reflexive pronouns are used in constructions, revealing that while Chinese lacks the "Verb + Oneself" structure, such constructions are common in English [1]. Examples of these include dress oneself, avail oneself of, pride oneself in, busy oneself in, and cry oneself, among others. In these constructions, reflexive pronouns often serve an anaphoric or emphatic function, while also playing a key role in conveying causative meanings [2].

In exploring how causative meanings emerge in these constructions, some scholars have classified them as a type of verb-predicate construction, where an action leads to a change in the state of an object, with the agent and the causative object being the same. This suggests that the action causes a change in the agent's own state [3]. Other scholars have treated these constructions as reflexive transitive events, categorizing them based on the presence of the reflexive pronoun and the semantic roles involved, in order to investigate how different types of causative meanings arise. However, existing studies have primarily concentrated on explaining the emergence of causative meanings in "Verb +

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Oneself" constructions or on offering broad classifications based on semantic structures. They have not fully addressed why verbs that typically lack causative meanings acquire such meanings when embedded in these constructions. Additionally, they have not explored why some verbs, which traditionally do not take objects, are able to take reflexive pronouns as objects in reflexive constructions.

For example:

- (1) Tom cried himself hoarse.
- (2) He will laugh himself silly.
- (3) He had finally run himself out.

In these sentences, the verbs cry, laugh, and run are usually intransitive, yet here they take reflexive pronouns as objects, indicating a shift in their syntactic behavior.

1.2. Purpose of This Article

This study aims to build on previous research regarding the "Verb + Oneself" reflexive constructions by conducting a detailed analysis of how reflexive pronouns, in various contexts, coerce their original meanings and shift to convey more complex causative meanings [4]. The study will also explore the generative mechanisms underlying these reflexive constructions, categorizing verbs based on their semantics and the semantic relationships between the verb, the subject, and the reflexive pronoun. Specifically, it will examine how different types of verbs—such as psychological verbs, action verbs, and state-change verbs—alter their meanings through reflexive constructions, investigating the mechanisms that drive these shifts. The research will seek to explain why verbs acquire causative meanings in these contexts and why verbs that traditionally cannot take objects are able to take reflexive pronouns as objects in reflexive constructions [5].

This study will focus specifically on reflexive transitive constructions where the reflexive pronoun must appear on the surface in order to express a causative meaning, leaving other constructions, such as those where the reflexive pronoun may or may not appear, outside the scope of this analysis.

1.3. Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Reflexive Constructions

The study of reflexive constructions has been influenced by various theoretical traditions, including formal syntax, semantics, and cognitive linguistics. In generative grammar, reflexive pronouns have traditionally been analyzed through the lens of Binding Theory, which explains their distribution based on structural principles. While these theories provide insights into fundamental grammatical rules, they fall short of explaining why verbs that are typically intransitive, such as cry or laugh, acquire causative readings when combined with a reflexive pronoun [6].

A different perspective emerges from typological and cross-linguistic research, where reflexive and middle markers are often viewed as encoding situations in which the agent and patient roles converge [7]. This approach is particularly relevant to English "Verb + Oneself" patterns, where the subject and the reflexive pronoun cannot be understood as separate participants. Reflexivity, then, is not simply a matter of binding, but a complex interaction between argument structure and conceptualization.

In construction grammar, the focus shifts from individual verbs to the ways in which they appear in various constructions [8]. It has been argued that certain constructions, like the English resultative, form an interconnected network of concepts, allowing for interpretations that go beyond the verb's internal semantics. Reflexive examples, such as shout oneself hoarse and cry oneself to sleep, illustrate how resultative meaning can emerge from the construction itself, rather than solely from the verb's inherent meaning. Recent experimental research further supports this view, showing that speakers rely more on constructional patterns than on lexical semantics when processing valency coercion. These findings highlight that causality in reflexive constructions is best understood through established structural patterns, rather than through temporary pragmatic inferences.

Additional support for this view comes from research on causality and argument structure, suggesting that the use of intransitive verbs in reflexive constructions may be driven by the structural properties of these constructions, rather than a radical shift in verb meaning. This helps explain why verbs like *run* or *cry*, which typically lack a direct object, can still take reflexive pronouns in causative contexts [9].

Taken together, these perspectives underscore the need for a unified framework to conceptualize reflexive structures. A purely syntactic approach cannot fully explain the semantic extensions observed in "Verb + Oneself" constructions, while a purely lexical account overlooks the importance of constructional context. By integrating insights from syntax, semantics, and cognitive models of coercion, this study aims to clarify how reflexive pronouns serve as a mechanism for semantic innovation in English.

2. Classify the Reflexive Construction Based on Verb Meaning

When analyzing English reflexive pronouns, we observe that they no longer treat the person as a unified whole, but instead divide it into two distinct parts: the ego and the superego. This bifurcation reveals a deeper aspect of human self-awareness [10]. In Western philosophical thought, there has traditionally been an emphasis on the separation of subject and object. This dichotomy divides the human experience into the two components mentioned above. Building on this idea, Lakoff's concept of the subject-self metaphor further divides an individual into the "subject" and multiple "selves." In this metaphor, the "subject" represents the core of a person's consciousness, the active and controlling part, while the "self" encompasses the individual's body, social status, behaviors, and other external expressions. While the subject is typically considered a part of the self, in certain contexts—especially in English—the subject and self can be distinctly separated, creating different layers of meaning [11]. This distinction is visually represented in Figure 1, which illustrates the subject within the self, and Figure 2, which shows the separation between the subject and self.

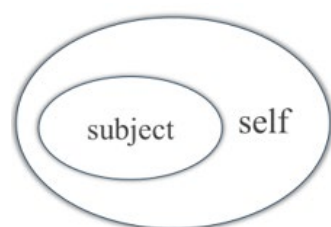


Figure 1. The subject within the self.

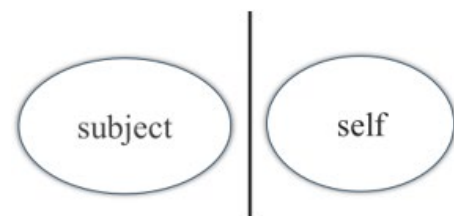


Figure 2. The subject-self separation.

In "Verb + Oneself" reflexive constructions, the varying meanings of the verbs often lead to a more explicit separation between the subject and the self [12]. For example, in the verb *blame oneself*, the meaning of *blame* extends to the level of the subject's self-reflection. The interaction between the subject (thought and consciousness) and the self (behavior or result) introduces an emotional tone of self-criticism. In contrast, constructions like *defend oneself* illustrate the subject (the initiator of the action) influencing or protecting their own state through a concrete action (self-defense). Here, although the

subject and self are semantically separated, they remain closely connected within the action process.

Previous classifications of reflexive constructions, such as those proposed by Huang, categorize them based on the verb's meaning-ranging from verbs related to habitual indulgence, dressing, and washing, to verbs that strengthen the subject's identity, involve actions, or express psychological cognition [13]. However, these classifications focus primarily on the superficial meaning of the verbs and do not fully account for the separation of subject and object embodied by reflexive pronouns. Moreover, they fail to clarify how causative meanings emerge within reflexive constructions, especially across different types of verbs.

Therefore, this study adopts the theory of the subject-self metaphor to integrate the semantic roles of the subject and self with the verb meanings in reflexive constructions [14]. It proposes that "Verb + Oneself" reflexive constructions, where the reflexive pronoun must appear, can be categorized into four distinct types based on the semantic characteristics of the verbs and the agent-patient relationship between the verb and the reflexive pronoun.

2.1. Psychological Verbs

Psychological verbs typically refer to mental or emotional states related to cognition, evaluation, or emotion [15]. In reflexive constructions, these verbs often indicate a change or reinforcement of the subject's mental state. Reflexive pronouns highlight the subject's participation in this change, frequently reflecting self-criticism, self-appreciation, or emotional fluctuations. Examples of such verbs include pride, content, trouble, amuse, satisfy, and others [16].

For instance:

(4) Murdoch prides himself on being a journalist with the skill to edit his papers personally.

(5) Lawrence J. contents himself with a bare expression of concurrence.

(6) Be a gentleman and don't trouble yourself with anything here.

In these reflexive structures, the subject is both the initiator and the recipient of the action. This means that the subject starts the psychological or emotional process and personally experiences its entire course. The change in the subject's psychological or emotional state is self-induced, deeply influencing their self-awareness and emotional experience. Additional examples, such as She convinced herself that everything would be fine, He tormented himself with endless doubts, and They reassured themselves that the risk was worth taking, further illustrate how the subject initiates the action and experiences the psychological change.

2.2. Action Verbs

In reflexive constructions involving action verbs, reflexive pronouns emphasize the subject's direct involvement in the action and its immediate consequences [17]. These constructions highlight how the subject participates in the action and the situation that follows. The action verbs in these constructions describe physical movements or behaviors that may be either self-imposed or self-directed. In these cases, the self is the one exerting control over itself. Examples include cry, sweep, cut, sing, and others.

For example:

(7) After drinking until five in the morning, he crawled into bed and cried himself to sleep.

(8) He swept himself to exhaustion.

(9) Nadine cut herself loose from the crowd and followed him.

(10) She sang herself hoarse.

Action verbs demonstrate the dual role of the self as both the performer of the action and the one who experiences its effects. The self actively performs the action, which, in

turn, influences its own physical, emotional, and mental state. Further examples, such as He drank himself unconscious, they worked themselves to the point of exhaustion, she danced herself into a frenzy, and He talked himself into trouble, show how an action directly affects the agent, leading to a new internal state.

2.3. State-Change Verbs

State-change verbs describe transformations, often involving a shift from one condition to another, such as physical, emotional, or cognitive changes. In reflexive constructions, the self both initiates the transformation and experiences the result, making the reflexive pronoun indicate both the cause and the recipient of the change. Examples of such verbs include exhaust, embarrass, tire, amuse, and others.

For example:

(11) She exhausted herself back to sleep once more.

(12) We are worried that someone embarrassed herself by her own choices and behavior.

(13) But Liam never tired himself out with crying, so his weight gain was very good.

In this type of reflexive construction, the self plays an active role in an action or behavior that changes the subject's state or condition. Many verbs like exhaust, embarrass, and tire originate from adjectives, showing that self-driven actions can alter a person's state and trigger distinct emotional or cognitive responses. Additional examples include She worried herself sick, He stressed himself into a state of panic, and They tired themselves out with constant training, which demonstrate how reflexive constructions expand the meaning of state-change verbs by encoding the causal link between action and self-experienced result.

2.4. Self-Control and Self-Constraint Verbs:

Self-control verbs describe how the subject changes their behavior, emotions, or mental state through self-regulation or limitation. These verbs emphasize that the control or constraint is exerted by the subject and has a direct influence on the self. The reflexive pronoun plays a crucial role in showing that the subject is the one who initiates the change, while the self is the one who experiences it. Verbs like discipline, force, and restrain exemplify this function, highlighting how the subject actively regulates or alters their own actions, emotions, or decisions.

For example:

(14) Try to discipline yourself into using up leftovers.

(15) He gripped the arms of his chair and forced himself to attend.

(16) She restrained herself from pinching another soldier.

These examples establish a clear relationship between the subject and the self. The subject initiates the act of self-restraint or limitation, while the self is the recipient of the imposed change or control. This reflects the mind's role in controlling behavior. Further examples, such as He forced himself to smile despite the disappointment, she restrained herself from shouting in anger, They disciplined themselves to practice daily, and He compelled himself to finish the task before resting, emphasize the dual effect of the subject as both controller and controlled, illustrating the deliberate imposition of will on the self.

3. Semantic Coercion in Reflexive Constructions

The concept of construction coercion was first introduced to describe how the structure of language and its metaphorical system coerce the meaning of words, resulting in vague and weakened semantic expressions. This theory was further developed by other scholars, who pointed out that coercion occurs when a construction requires a specific interpretation that is not independently encoded by particular lexical items. The concept of metonymy, as a cognitive mechanism, plays a central role in this process. Metonymy establishes mental connections between the source and target domains through contiguity,

with causal association being one of its key forms. Causal association enables ideas to move from one place to another in the mind, linking the "cause" in the source domain to the "effect" in the target domain. For example, by stating the result of an event, one can work backward to figure out its cause or understand the result through the causal hint provided by the cause.

In reflexive constructions, semantic coercion operates through metonymic associations. These associations can vary across different types of reflexive constructions, depending on the verbs used and the semantic roles involved. By applying the concept of metonymy and examining the differences between the source and target domains, we can analyze how semantic coercion functions in reflexive constructions. The following four conditions illustrate how coercion operates in these constructions.

3.1. *The "Self"'s Personal Qualities change the "Subject"'s Psychological State*

In the case of psychological causative verbs, the subject's state changes due to the personal qualities of the self. For instance:

(17) He prided himself on his fair and honest trading.

Here, the metonymic mechanism works as follows: the source domain is the self's qualities-fair and honest. The target domain is the subject's psychological state, represented by He. The self's positive qualities, such as fairness and honesty, enhance the subject's social status or reputation, leading to a sense of self-pride. The causal relation between the self's qualities (source domain) and the subject's psychological state (target domain) triggers metonymy. This connection facilitates semantic coercion, giving the verb pride a causative meaning-to cause oneself to feel proud.

3.2. *The "Self"'s Actions Change Its Own Properties*

Action verbs describe how the self performs an action that directly changes one of its own properties. For example:

(18) Bill cried himself to sleep.

In this sentence, the source domain is Bill's action of crying, and the target domain is his resulting physical state-falling asleep. The act of crying leads to a transformation from wakefulness to sleep. This causal relationship between the self's action and its physical state enables metonymy. The success of this metonymy transforms the originally non-causative verb cry into a causative verb-to cry oneself into a state of sleep.

3.3. *The "Self"'s Actions Affect the "Subject"'s State*

State-change verbs describe transformations, often involving a shift from one condition to another. In these constructions, the self performs an action that causes the subject's emotional or mental state to change. For example:

(19) In high school, Taylor had embarrassed herself at one of her parents' many dinner parties by leading a toast.

In this sentence, Taylor's self-initiated the action of leading a toast, which caused a change in her emotional state-embarrassment. The source domain is the self's action (leading a toast), and the target domain is the subject's emotional state (feeling embarrassed). The causal link between the self's action and the emotional change in the subject facilitates metonymy, allowing semantic coercion to transform the verb embarrass into to cause oneself to feel embarrassed.

3.4. *The "Subject" Controls the Actions of the "Self"*

Unlike the previous categories, this type of coercion is initiated by the subject, especially in self-restraint or self-control constructions. In these cases, the subject consciously directs and controls the actions of the self. For example:

(20) Discipline yourself to get out of bed, be around people, and stay active.

In this example, the subject's conscious thoughts (subject) control the actions of the self, such as getting out of bed, interacting with others, and staying active. The subject's awareness and intention trigger the actions of the self, showing how the mind governs behavior. This conscious control forms a causal link, where the subject's ideas bring about changes in the self's actions. This causal connection enables metonymy and allows semantic coercion to assign causative meaning to the verb discipline, transforming it into to cause oneself to act in a disciplined manner.

4. The Analysis of Generative Mechanism

After discussing how different types of verbs undergo semantic coercion to acquire causative meanings within reflexive constructions, we have addressed the first major question regarding these constructions: the semantic transformation of verbs. Now, we turn to the second question: Why are verbs that originally do not take direct objects able to combine with reflexive pronouns as their objects in reflexive constructions? Additionally, what is the nature of the agent-patient relationship in these actions?

From the classifications discussed earlier, we observe various patterns: some actions are initiated by the self and affect the subject, while others are initiated by the subject and influence the self. However, through Lakoff's Subject-Self Metaphor, it becomes apparent that these distinctions ultimately converge on a fundamental idea: the agent and the patient are, in fact, the same individual. Reflexive constructions highlight this internal process of an individual acting upon themselves to alter their internal state.

Moreover, it is important to consider the role of reflexive verbs in this context. Some verbs must be accompanied by reflexive pronouns, while others can have either explicit or implicit reflexive pronouns. The reflexive pronouns following these verbs serve primarily to indicate the subject's influence on itself, carrying a relatively weak referential meaning. These reflexive verbs, often categorized as semi-reflexive, demonstrate that reflexive pronouns are not just marking the direct object but are instead integral to conveying the causative force of the action.

The linguistic structure of English reflexive pronouns also supports this idea. Reflexive pronouns are formed by combining the objective case of personal pronouns (e.g., me, him, them) with the morpheme self. Etymologically, the term self originates from Proto-Germanic, where it conveys the idea of "on one's own." This origin underscores the concept of independence and self-direction, which aligns with the function of reflexive pronouns in these constructions.

Crucially, self-acts as a symbolic element, enhancing our understanding of processes involving self-control, self-regulation, or self-induced changes. In this context, the reflexive pronoun transcends its role as a direct object that refers to something external, assuming a more functional position. It illustrates the causative meaning of the sentence, facilitating the transformation of verbs in reflexive constructions. This transformation allows verbs to express actions the subject performs upon themselves to achieve a specific state or effect, thus altering their inherent meaning and extending their syntactic and semantic capabilities.

5. Implications for Theories of Coercion and Language Use

The examination of "Verb + oneself" constructions helps interpret coercion as a construction-based phenomenon. Reflexive pronouns are not merely referential devices; rather, they reconstruct the argument structure of verbs by establishing an intrinsic causal relationship between the subject and the self. From this perspective, coercion should be viewed as a standard linguistic process, rather than an extraordinary repair technique. This aligns with the constructivist view that meaning arises from form-function pairings, rather than being determined solely by lexical semantics.

Cognitive mechanisms involved in reflective coercion can be further elaborated. The Subject-Self Metaphor provides a conceptual foundation for distinguishing between the

subject and the self. Metonymy explains the causal mechanism by which attributes of the self-provoke changes in the subject's state. For instance, in the construction cry oneself hoarse, the action of prolonged crying (the self) leads to a bodily result (the subject). This analysis reveals that coercion in reflexive contexts operates through organized conceptual processes, establishing a clear distinction between coercion and metaphor. Coercion relies on causal contiguity within the same domain, while metaphor creates cross-domain mappings.

Cross-linguistic evidence further underscores the relevance of reflexive constructions. In languages like German, reflexive verbs (sich-verbs) demonstrate how reflexivity can become grammaticalized as part of the argument structure. In contrast, Chinese reflexives rarely form fixed "Verb + self" templates and rely more on pragmatic inference. English reflexives occupy an intermediate position: they are not obligatory markers, but they extend verb semantics in causative directions. These contrasts suggest important avenues for further comparative research, illustrating how different languages allocate responsibility for encoding internal causation across lexical, syntactic, and constructional resources.

The analysis also has practical implications. In pedagogy, recognizing that reflexive pronouns encode internal causation can help learners interpret idiomatic expressions more accurately. In translation, treating reflexive causatives as construction-driven helps avoid overly literal equivalents in languages without comparable forms. More broadly, combining corpus evidence with experimental findings—such as recent studies on valency coercion—provides a robust methodology for examining how speakers interpret and process novel reflexive expressions.

6. Future Directions

Although the present study has provided a systematic analysis of the semantic coercion and generative mechanisms of "Verb + oneself" constructions in English, several promising avenues remain open for further research.

First, corpus-based investigations could provide quantitative support for the present findings. Large-scale corpora, such as COCA or the BNC, could be used to identify which verbs most frequently occur in reflexive constructions, which verbs are less typical or newly emerging in this pattern, and how these uses vary across different registers, such as news, fiction, and spoken discourse. Such distributional evidence would complement the qualitative analysis in this study and further illuminate the diachronic trends of semantic coercion.

Second, psycholinguistic experiments could shed light on the cognitive mechanisms behind generating reflexive coercion. Reaction-time studies, eye-tracking, or ERP (event-related potential) experiments could compare expressions like cry oneself to sleep with canonical intransitive uses, such as cry loudly, to test whether coercion requires additional cognitive processing. The results of these investigations would provide insight into the psychological reality of coercion and reveal how speakers interpret causal chains between agents and patients in reflexive constructions.

Finally, the findings have pedagogical significance and offer cross-linguistic insights. For second-language learners, expressions such as pride oneself on or work oneself to death are often misunderstood. Presenting them as instances of internal causation, rather than as isolated idioms, could facilitate more systematic learning. Cross-linguistic comparisons with reflexive constructions in languages like Chinese (zìjǐ), German (sich-verbs), or French (se-verbs) would also be useful to explain how different languages encode self-directed causation. This comparative approach could benefit translation practice and further enrich our typological understanding of reflexivity and coercion across languages.

7. Conclusion

This study investigates the semantic constraints and generative mechanisms of reflexive structures involving "verb + oneself" in English. By applying Lakoff's Subject-Self Metaphor and metonymy theory, the research categorizes these constructions into four distinct types, elucidating how reflexive pronouns enable verbs to acquire causative meanings. Reflexive pronouns play a crucial role in this transformation, allowing intransitive or non-causative verbs to express causative effects within the same agent-patient structure. This process establishes a connection between the subject and the self, unveiling the unique linguistic mechanism of self-directed behavior.

The study demonstrates that semantic coercion operates through a metaphorical mechanism, establishing a causal link between the subject and the self. Verbs undergo semantic shifts when interacting with reflexive pronouns, transforming their original meanings and enabling new syntactic functions. Furthermore, this research highlights the flexibility of reflexive constructions in English, showcasing their ability to express the complex interplay between action, emotion, and self-awareness.

By shedding light on the underlying mechanisms of semantic transformation in reflexive structures, this study contributes to a broader understanding of these constructions in English. It uncovers the deep linguistic processes that drive innovation and provides a theoretical framework for future research on reflexivity and causality within language. The findings also emphasize the need to integrate metaphorical and metonymic theories to better explain the dynamic relationship between form and meaning in linguistic structures.

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