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Reflexivity in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*: A Corpus Study

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ABSTRACT

The main goal of this paper is to propose a new approach to the semantic classes of reflexive constructions in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*. Before analyzing the corpus data, the study tries to explain what reflexivity actually means and how it is described by various scholars on the semantic level. It also examines the most common technique conveying reflexivity: constructions involving the use of the Old English personal pronouns, sometimes followed by a proper form of *-self* (Penning 1875; Farr 1905; Mitchell 1985; van Gelderen 2000). However, in addition to truly reflexive meaning, Old English personal pronouns could render other meanings. For instance, they could express a situation in which the Agent is not the Patient but its benefactor. Moreover, they could accompany pseudo-reflexive verbs, i.e. verbs used with an inanimate Subject. Also, personal pronouns could be used to express reciprocity. Last, they were employed to express a situation in which the Agent was not also a typical Patient, but its presence was essential for the completion of an action.

1. Introduction

Among the many changes that English has undergone over the centuries is one which regards how reflexive relations are expressed. It is commonly accepted that the term “reflexivity” is used to express a co-reference of two arguments of a verb. In Modern English, reflexivity is mainly rendered by a set of *self*-pronouns which refer to the Subject. Therefore, while discussing reflexivity, many scholars define reflexive verbs as those followed by a reflexive marker. However, the definition is difficult to apply to Old English because that language lacked specialized reflexive pronouns.

Instead, personal pronouns, co-referential with the Subject, were employed to convey reflexivity. Over time, the Old English personal pronouns started being accompanied by structures with the pronoun *self*, which otherwise played the role of an intensifier. As the present work will show, not all the uses of co-referential personal pronouns guaranteed the verb to demonstrate a truly reflexive meaning. For instance, personal pronouns could be used in reciprocal situations or could be only benefactors of an action, but the action itself would have had no impact on the Subject. Moreover, the Old English personal pronouns were also employed in sentences with an inanimate Subject (cf. Ito 1998:58). The last class to be presented here comprises sentences in which the Agent and the Patient do not directly refer to each other, but are somehow involved in an action.

The data for the present study come from the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus*. The line numbers in the examples correspond to the numbers in the corpus. The translations of *Ælfric's Lives of Saints* are taken from Skeat (1881).

2. Theoretical background

Before discussing the way Old English expressed a reflexive meaning, an analysis of reflexivity is required. It is generally accepted that the term “reflexive” refers to a reflexive marker or two co-indexed arguments. In Modern English the role of the marker is played by a reflexive pronoun being one of the arguments of a verb. However, not only reflexive pronouns imply reflexive meaning. In Modern English, as in Old English, there is a class of inherently reflexive verbs requiring no object (Everaert 1986, Reinhart – Reuland 1993). Thus, saying that a reflexive marker is the hallmark of reflexivity is rather inadequate. Therefore, in this work, using a semantic criterion, reflexivity will be understood as a situation where “a participant acts on himself or herself, rather than on any others” (Asher – Simpson 1994: 3504).

Generally, there are two strategies used to express reflexivity. Cross-linguistically, languages can use a nominal and/or a verbal strategy. Faltz (1985) divides the former into reflexive pronouns (e.g. Latin *se*), head reflexives and adjunct reflexives (e.g. English *-self*). He claims that only if a language uses head or adjunct reflexives can the same marker be used for both the reflexive and the intensifier. This claim is also true as regards Old English because in that language the reflexive and the intensifier could have the same form. These reflexive verbs are transitive, and Faltz (1985) calls them “argument reflexives”. The second strategy a language can employ to

express reflexivity is the use of a verbal predicate or an affix. Old English, just like Modern English, had a group of reflexives which rendered a reflexive meaning via a verbal predicate, called by Faltz (1985) “verbal reflexives”, for it is the inherent property of a verb rather than a reflexive marker that yields a reflexive meaning. Modern English verbal reflexives are intransitive.

As pointed out by Haiman (1983: 803), a verbal strategy is typical of verbs denoting actions which we normally perform on ourselves rather than others. He calls these verbs “introverted verbs”. He also distinguishes another type of verbs: “extroverted verbs”. These verbs are typically other-directed and languages having two ways of rendering reflexivity usually use a nominal strategy to express this type of reflexivity. A similar classification is proposed by Lyons (1968: 361-362), who distinguishes between overt (explicit) and covert (implicit) reflexivity. The first class includes verbs requiring the presence of a reflexive marker whereas the second comprises lexically reflexive verbs. Verbal reflexives are intransitive and project only one argument. When it comes to their semantics, it can be said that they involve two theta roles assigned to the same argument.

3. Reflexive classes in *Lives of Saints*

The first class of reflexive verbs to be discussed is composed of “grooming verbs” (cf. Kemmer 1993: 16). These verbs involve actions we usually perform on our bodies. Typical representatives of this group are verbs such as *wash*, *shave* and *comb*. These verbs can be perceived as prototypical reflexives because they are typically performed by people on themselves. Therefore, in Modern English grooming verbs are inherently reflexive and require no overt argument. In *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, as shown in (1), grooming verbs' counterparts of today's inherent grooming verbs are mainly accompanied by a co-referential pronoun. As Peitsara (1997: 278) states, “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”.

(1)

- (a) and wolde **hine baðian** on þam wlacum wætere [and desired to bathe himself in the luke water] (*ÆLS Forty Soldiers*, 156)
- (b) and **unscrydde hine sylfne** [and unclothed himself] (*ÆLS Forty Soldiers*, 210)

- (c) **unscrydde hine** eallne [stripped himself entirely] (*ÆLS Forty Soldiers*, 242)
- (d) and þonne **hi sylfe baðian** [and then bathe herself] (*ÆLS Æthelthryth*, 41)
- (e) Iudas ða **hine gescrydde** mid his scinendan byrnan [Judas then girt himself with his shining breast-plate] (*ÆLS Abdon & Sennes*, 279)
- (f) and **scrydde hine** mid hæran [and clothed himself with haircloth] (*ÆLS Martin*, 444)
- (g) and (he) **scrydde hine** mid hæran [he clothed himself with haircloth] (*ÆLS Martin*, 659)
- (h) Martinus þa sona **hine sylfne unscrydde** [then Martin immediately unclothed himself] (*ÆLS Martin*, 912)
- (i) **He scrydde hine** ða mid þam ylcan reafe [then he clothed himself with the same garment] (*ÆLS Martin*, 933)

In *Lives of Saints*, there are three grooming verbs, none of which is intransitive. This shows that modern inherent reflexive verbs could first be non-inherent verbs which, with time, acquired an idiomatic meaning (Grimshaw 1982). Moreover, the items in (1) show that the same reflexive verb could be accompanied either by a bare pronoun or by a pronoun with a proper form of *-self*. Therefore, we can say that probably it was not only the verb itself that was responsible for the choice of a strategy. Likely, there were other factors, such as poetic metre or dialect, which could exert an impact on the choice of a reflexive strategy.

In (1), only two verbs are accompanied by *-self*. As claimed by Möhlig – Klagen (2000: 250), Old English verbs that developed into today's transitive verbs were commonly used with personal pronouns accompanied by *-self*, whereas verbs that developed into today's inherent reflexive verbs were usually followed by a bare personal pronoun.

Aside from grooming verbs, there are many other prototypical reflexive verbs, i.e. verbs which express a situation in which the Agent performs an action on itself rather than other potential Patients. These verbs are often called "true reflexives". As Ito (1998: 60) states, every verb can belong to this group on the condition that it can be a potential reflexive. Semantically, unlike verbal reflexives, this type of verb does not form a natural class. In *Lives of Saints* reflexives belonging to this class could be followed by a personal pronoun on its own or followed by *-self*:

- (2)
- (a) and **eow sylfe** underþeodað þæra cyninga gesetnyssum [and subjugate yourselves to the king's commands] (*ÆLS Forty Soldiers*, 23)

- (b) ða Eugenia **hi** gebletsode [then Eugenia blessed herself] (*ÆLS Eugenia*, 171)
- (c) and wolde **hine** behydan [and desired to hide himself] (*ÆLS Basil*, 471)
- (d) and mid healicum synnum **hi sylfe** fordyde [and was destroying herself by deadly sins] (*ÆLS Basil*, 527)
- (e) Ða bræd se sceocca **hine sylfne** to menn [then the devil turned himself into a man] (*ÆLS Forty Soldiers*, 222)
- (f) and alysað **eow** fram witum [and release yourself (sic) from torments] (*ÆLS Sebastian*, 395)
- (g) Ða gebæd **hine** Thomas bealdlice to his Drihtne [then Thomas boldly commended himself to his Lord] (*ÆLS Thomas*, 403)

All the verbs in (2) are true reflexive verbs, for their objects refer back to the subject and the subjects are both the initiators and the endpoints of the actions. Still, the presence of a personal pronoun did not guarantee a true reflexive. As presented in (3), the same construction could imply reciprocity. Old English had different ways to imply a reciprocal meaning: for instance, it used words having meanings similar to *each other*: *ægðer*, *naþer*, *oþer*, *ægghwylc*, *ælc*, *gehwa*, *gehwylc*, *ænig* used with *oþer*. (cf. van Kemenade 1994: 127). Still, the plural forms of personal pronouns could also express reciprocity:

- (3)
- (a) Hi þa sona begen begyrndon **hi** cafllice, and to Gode gebædon [then forthwith they both begirt themselves vigorously, and prayed to God] (*ÆLS Sebastian*, 247)
- (b) ðæt is se lichama and seo sawl winnað **him betweonan** [that is the body and the soul, fight between themselves] (*ÆLS Auguries*, 7)

Item (3) contains examples expressing a mutual relation with two participants. In addition, a personal pronoun could express a situation with at least three participants who exert an impact on each other. As presented by Nedjalkov – Geniesiene (2007: 404), reciprocal specifiers are words or phrases which are reciprocal in meaning. They distinguish two types of reciprocal specifiers: one meaning *mutually* and the second meaning *among/between our/your/themselves*. The latter meaning is found in the following examples:

- (4)
- (a) and þas ðreo þing habbað annysse **him betwynan** [and these three have unity among themselves] (*ÆLS Christmas*, 119)
- (b) nu we swa recelease syndon, and swa reþe **us betwynan** [now we are so careless and so cruel among ourselves'] (*ÆLS Maurice*, 132)

- (c) secgende **him betwynan** [saying among themselves] (*ÆLS Sebastian*, 456)
- (d) þæt hi beon ungeðwære and þwyre **him betwynan** [that they shall be disagreeing, and perverse among themselves] (*ÆLS Pr Moses*, 235)
- (e) and menn beoð geworhte wolice **him betwynan** [men are made unjust amongst themselves] (*ÆLS Pr Moses* 294)

This use of personal pronouns should come as no surprise because many languages employ reflexive markers to render a reciprocal meaning. For instance, German employs reciprocal verbs accompanied only by the unambiguous reciprocal pronoun *einander*. However, if a verb allows for the use of the marker *sich*, reflexive and reciprocal readings are possible:

- (5) Sie küssen sich [they kiss each other] or [They kiss themselves]

Actually, in many languages, reciprocal markers are the same as reflexive markers. This is the case because “reciprocal markers often develop from reflexive” (Asher – Simpson 1994): for example, in Spanish the pronoun *se* can have a reciprocal and/or a reflexive meaning (Buttefield 2006: 515):

- (6)
- (a) Margarita **se** estaba preparando para salir. [Margarita was getting (herself) ready to go out]
- (b) **Se** escriben a menudo. [they write to each other]
- (c) **Se** golpean [they are hitting themselves] or [they are hitting each other]

It is generally believed that in Modern English the reflexive pronoun *-self* cannot play the role of a reciprocal specifier meaning *mutually*. However, as presented in (7), in some rare cases, *self* can have this reciprocal reading (Ryan 2004: 251):

- (7) Ok ladies and gentlemen, now that George and Saddam are done introducing **themselves**, we can move on to the business of the day.

Still, not all the uses of Old English personal pronouns resulted in either reciprocal or truly reflexive interpretation; they were employed in sentences in which the Agent does not act on itself but only draws advantages from the action expressed by the predicate:

- (8)
- (a) and **him** munuclif aræran, swa swa se oðer gemynte [and establish monasteries for himself, as the other had intended] (*ÆLS Maur*, 117)
 - (b) and smeade hu he mihte þæt mæden **him** begitan [and he sought how he might get the maiden for himself] (*ÆLS Agatha*, 7)
 - (c) we soðlice feohtað for **us sylfe** [we verily fight for ourselves] (*ÆLS Abdon & Sennes*, 312)
 - (d) and nacode scrydde, and nan þing **him sylfum** [and dress the naked, and (kept) nothing for himself] (*ÆLS Martin*, 51)
 - (e) and on Mediolana **him** mynster arærde [and erected for himself a monastery in Milan] (*ÆLS Martin*, 188)
 - (f) he gestaðelode **him** mynster [he built for himself a monastery] (*ÆLS Martin*, 310)

In (8), personal pronouns are co-referential with the subjects. However, the Agents do not carry out the actions on themselves; they are only benefactors of the action carried out on other objects. Therefore, the items cannot be called true reflexives and have to be treated as of a distinct group.

The next type of reflexives is the pseudo-reflexive (Ito 1998: 58). This type is possible only with an inanimate Subject, and in Modern English the verb itself is intransitive. For instance, in the sentence *the fire extended itself*, *fire* is an inanimate subject, but it is capable of extending itself. As shown in (9), in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, there are two examples of pseudo-reflexives: (9a) accompanied by a personal pronoun followed by *-self*, and (9b) accompanied by a bare personal pronoun:

- (9)
- (a) and ealle lichamlicra þinga hiw heo mæg on **hyre sylfre** gehiwian [and every form of corporeal things can shape within itself] (*ÆLS Christmas*, 225)
 - (b) ac se lig **hine** todælde on twegen dælas sona [but the flame instantly divided itself into two parts] (*ÆLS Agnes*, 220)

Also, the examples in (10) do not imply a typical reflexive meaning, for the verbs do not have a direct impact on the Subject. Nevertheless, the items can be called reflexive since the participants have to contribute to the completion of the actions. Therefore, they can also be treated as a reflexive class:

- (10)
- (a) hu se hælend be **him sylfum** spræc [how Jesus spoke of Himself] (*ÆLS Christmas*, 13)

- (b) and to þam ecan life gelæde þurh **hine sylfne** [and bring eternal life through Himself] (*ÆLS Auguries*, 268)
- (c) swa swa Crist astealde þurh **hine sylfne** þa bysne [as Christ set the example through Himself] (*ÆLS Maccabees*, 846)
- (d) and we magon understandan þæt hyre leoht is of **hyre** [and we can understand that her light is from herself] (*ÆLS Christmas*, 73)
- (e) ac ic nelle secgan unsoð on **me sylfe** [but I will not speak untruth of myself] (*ÆLS Ash Wed*, 191)

To recapitulate, in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, reflexivity was expressed by personal pronouns, sometimes accompanied by a proper form of *self*. The first group of reflexives comprises true reflexive verbs of which grooming verbs are the best example. They are used in a sentence where the Agent is employed in an activity expressed by the predicate. Another way of rendering a reflexive situation is by means of reciprocal verbs followed by a personal pronoun. They can be perceived as reflexive for they express a two-participant event in which each of the participants is both the initiator and the endpoint of a given action.

Personal pronouns were also used to express a situation in which the Agent is only a benefactor. This class cannot be called truly reflexive because the Agent and the Patient are two distinct entities. The next group presented is comprised of pseudo-reflexive verbs. These verbs are always used with an inanimate Subject. The last group discussed expresses a situation in which the Agent, perhaps indirectly, participates in the action expressed by the predicate.

4. Conclusions

Generally, reflexivity refers to the constructions that use grammatical means to co-index the semantic and/or syntactic arguments of a verb. In Old English, unlike in Modern English, personal pronouns could be bound in their local domain, for they sufficed to convey a reflexive relation. Still, with time, the Old English intensifier *-self* developed into reflexives and thus the two could have the same form. Therefore, sometimes it is quite difficult to distinguish between the reflexive and the emphatic use of pronouns. In languages such as English, where the two are identical, the differentiation can be based on a syntactic or a semantic criterion. On the basis of the semantic criterion, we can recognize at least four types of reflexives. In *Ælfric's Lives of Saints* all reflexives are "argument reflexives" for they are followed by a personal pronoun, sometimes accompanied by a proper form of *-self*. The first class

of reflexives consists of true reflexive verbs. The best representatives of this class are grooming verbs. In the text under discussion, there are three grooming verbs, none of which is intransitive. Aside from that of a truly reflexive meaning, there are also other classes of reflexive applications in the manuscript. For instance, personal pronouns could be used in reciprocal situations. Reciprocal verbs can be considered reflexive, for they express a mutual action in which two participants are both the Agent and the Patient. Moreover, they could be employed in sentences where the Agent is only a benefactor of an action, but the action itself would not exert any impact on the Subject. This class of reflexives differs from true reflexives, because, the Agent in no way carries out the action on itself. Moreover, the Old English personal pronouns were also employed in sentences with an inanimate Subject. The last class presented here comprises sentences in which the Agent and the Patient do not directly refer to each other, but the Agent is somehow involved in an action, and thus this class can be seen as reflexive.

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