

# Reflexive and pronominal verbs in bilingual dictionaries

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«They've a temper, some of them — particularly verbs, they're the proudest — adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs — however, *I* can manage the whole lot of them!»

L. Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, Chapter VI, «Humpty Dumpty»

## What it is about

Microstructures of entries devoted to verbs are generally different from microstructures of other parts of speech, mainly because a verb, through its transitive and/or intransitive nature, determines the syntactic structure of the sentence. Therefore verb entries (in good dictionaries, at least) are necessarily rich in information about their most common linguistic environments.

Since the way verb entries are dealt with in bilingual dictionaries often depends on the way they are dealt with in monolingual dictionaries of the two languages paired, first I shall briefly sketch how verb entries account for reflexive and pronominal forms in modern monolingual dictionaries of English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. Then I shall centre your and my attention on verb entries in bilingual dictionaries, considering how they display reflexive and pronominal forms. I shall also suggest abandoning a misleading grammatical terminology and argue that bilingual microstructures built according to a homonymic approach are perhaps less instructive than microstructures based on semantic grouping, but are easier to look up (and to write down!).

## 1. Why focus on reflexive and pronominal verbs?

Pronominal verbs are to be found in many European languages and therefore they interest many language pairs, even though in some pairs they are a less obtrusive presence (German-English) and in other pairs they are very frequent (for instance, just to mention cases I have experienced personally, Romance languages — English, pairs of Romance languages, German— Romance languages, Russian-English, Russian-German, Russian-Romance languages).

What actually decided me to put in the foreground treatment of reflexive and pronominal verbs is the fact that as a lexicographer I am very interested in discovering which kind of linguistic phenomena can (ought to be) fully described *only* in dictionaries. Pronominal verbs, or better the fact that a verb can be both transitive and/or intransitive and pronominal, or just pronominal, is exactly what traditional grammarians and modern linguists call «a lexical fact». Scholars belonging to different

linguistic schools agree in leaving this domain to dictionaries, since they could not find any syntactic rule or semantic analysis that would predict which verb can have a pronominal form.<sup>1</sup>

Let us quote, for instance, Helbig-Buscha (1977, p. 184), who, dealing with verbs such as *sich verlieben*, *sich etwas ausbitten*, *sich freuen*, *sich etwas vorstellen*, affirm that they are: «nur listenmäßig erfäßbar, da hier das Reflexivpronomen als Verbbestandteil zählt, dessen Vorhandensein bzw. Nichtvorhandensein im Einzelfall eine Frage des Wörterbuchs bleibt». We can compare such a statement with the conclusion of the generativist: Burzio (1986, p. 38) remarks that *rompersi* and *affondare* behave in the same way, they are AVB/BV pairs<sup>2</sup>, but that: «we find no principled way to predict when in such transitive-ergative alternation *si* will appear. We may regard this as governed by lexical idiosyncrasies».

We can add to the previous opinions also that of Ilson and Mel'čuk (1989, p. 340): they do not speak overtly of pronominal verbs, but they deal with the verb *bake* used intransitively in *The rolls baked quickly*. They call this use «quasi-passive» and declare: «If LEXICALLY CONDITIONED (like Quasi-Passives), a phenomenon should be accounted for in the dictionary. [...] If GRAMMATICALLY/SEMANTICALLY CONDITIONED (like benefactives, Object-Deletion), a phenomenon should be accounted for in the grammar and has no place in the dictionary, except —for pedagogical purposes— in the examples». Even though many, for more than pedagogical purposes, prefer to have also grammatically and semantically conditioned phenomena in the dictionary, let us neglect for the moment the second part of their statement, and focus on the first part which serves my purpose: I wonder whether Ilson and Mel'čuk would like to apply the label *quasi-passive* to the intransitive use of *break* and to the corresponding Italian pronominal *rompersi*, but I am sure that they acknowledge the implied transitive-ergative alternation (Burzio, 1986) or transitive-inchoative alternation (Atkins, Kegl, Levin, 1988) as lexically conditioned and therefore belonging to the dictionary domain.

## 2. Labelling a verb entry *reflexive and/or pronominal*

For many centuries traditional grammatical terminology for modern European languages has known only the term *reflexive*: grammarians of French, Spanish, Italian, German and Russian were fully aware that verbs such as the Italian *accorgersi*, the German *sich verhalten*, the French *se douter*, the Spanish *emperrarse*, the Russian *pakaiatsa*, *ulibatsa*, were not «reflexive» in the way in which, *lavarsi*, *se laver*, *sich waschen*, are the reflexive forms of *lavare*, *laver*, *waschen*. In fact in *accorgersi* or *se douter* there is no action «that is directed back upon the agent or the grammatical

1. There are, of course, diachronic explanations, as Arcaini and Galetto have clearly shown in their analysis of middle/reflexive diathesis in Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Italian (see Arcaini-Galetto, 1990). A pioneer study in Italian pronominal verb structures is Lo Cascio (1970).

2. Burzio (1986, pp. 37-40) quotes the following two couplets:  
Giovanni (A) rompe (V) il vetro (B) Giovanni breaks the glass  
Il vetro (B) si rompe (V) The glass breaks

L'artiglieria (A) affondò (V) due navi nemiche (B) The artillery sank two enemy ships  
Due navi nemiche (B) affondarono (V) Two enemy ships sank

subject» (definition quoted from Webster's Third New International Dictionary 1986), no «rückbezügliches Verhältnis» (Helbig-Buscha, 1977, p. 177). Grammarians also propose substitution and coordination tests showing that certain verbs, even though they appear with a 'reflexive' pronoun, do not make the action return upon the subject:

Mi lavo = Lavo me stesso  
 Mi pento \*Pento me stesso  
 Ich wasche mich. Ich wasche ihn  
 Ich fürchte mich. Ich fürchte ihn  
 Ich wasche mich und ihn  
 \* Ich fürchte mich und ihn

It is enough that the particles *si, se, sich, tsa*, called reflexive pronouns, also appear in those verbs which were and are not paraphrasable as «X verb oneself», for grammarians to continue calling any verb with such particles *reflexive*. Most grammars have tried to distinguish the true reflexive use of the pronoun from its lexicalized use. We find therefore in grammar handbooks and essays a set of adjectives which accompany fake-reflexive verbs: *apparent, inherent, intransitive, fossilized, lexicalized, obligatory* are some of them, but those adjectives have not percolated into dictionary labelling practice, where also the reciprocal use of the reflexive often went under the same label.

In the second half of the last century and in this century lexicographers have begun using different labels, above all monolingual lexicographers, disturbed in their definitory work by the inconsistency between the meaning of the label *reflexive* and the meaning of the verb which is not reflexive at all. In French dictionaries *verbe pronominal* appears, in Spanish *verbo pronominal*, and in Italian dictionaries the label *intransitivo pronominale*. Bilingual dictionaries slowly follow this trend, but still today we find bilingual dictionaries using *reflexive* as the only and general label (see, for instance, Collins Gem Spanish-Italian and German-Italian, Vox Bibliograf Spanish-Italian).

Since, by default, any transitive verb can be used with a true reflexive pronoun (i.e. a pronominal object which corefers with the subject) it is unnecessary to record true reflexive forms: their forms and meanings are easily derivable from transitive forms and meanings. Smaller dictionaries therefore do not record them so as to save space and we witness the paradox that in certain small bilingual dictionaries whenever we find a verb labelled *reflexive*, we are sure that it is not a true reflexive verb.

Though unnecessary because derivable and transparent in meaning, true reflexive uses of verbs are often registered in larger monolingual dictionaries for the sake of completeness and also because when lexicographers are obliged to record other —not reflexive— meanings of forms with *se, si, sich*, they do not want to raise in the reader the doubt that a true reflexive meaning is not used. Larger bilingual dictionaries have to record true reflexive verbs because often they are translated with not reflexive verbs in the target language and/or with verbs differing from those which translate the transitive use. Therefore in larger dictionaries it is necessary to distinguish true reflexives from forms which present the pronouns, *se, si, sich* as lexicalised parts of the verb without reflexive meanings.

*Pronominal verb* appears to be the most successful label nowadays: it is already used in France and Spain. It is used in the French-Italian half of Larousse-Sansoni

(1981), while *pentirsi* in the Italian-French half remained *reflexive*, and it is now used also in the Italian-English half of the bilingual dictionary Paravia (1989).

It is a label which actually does not convey a lot of information: its main advantage is to signal that the verb has a form with a pronoun *without* telling us anything about the role of such a pronoun. Its semantic neutrality allows it to be used as a general term also covering true reflexive uses, but in most cases it is assigned to pronominal verbs which are neither reflexive nor reciprocal.

A subset of pronominal verbs could be *rightly* labelled *ergative* as generative studies have shown (see Burzio, 1986, pp. 36-42), but such a label has, to my knowledge, entered, for the moment, only *Cobuild* and it does not seem that many other dictionaries are going to follow its example. And this is not only because, usually, dictionaries are the last to incorporate changes in grammatical terminology, but mainly because, as Atkins, Kegl and Levin (1988) convincingly demonstrated, such information can be conveyed avoiding this new and rather opaque label.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. English microstructures v. the rest of Europe

In modern monolingual dictionaries of English, French, German, Italian and Spanish we find that there are two main models of verb entries, used to convey information about broad syntactic features:

1. transitive, intransitive, and eventual reflexive and pronominal forms of the verb constitute separate blocks in the microstructure and each block may be subdivided into distinct senses (see, e.g. *Robert, Webster's Third, Collins English Dictionary, Zingarelli*); reflexive and pronominal forms may even appear printed as a sub-entry (see DFC, *Garzanti della lingua italiana*);

2. the microstructure has only one series of numbered senses, and  
 a) under those senses are grouped, on the basis of shared meaning, both transitive and intransitive uses (see, e.g. OALD, LDOCE, *Harrap's Easy English Dictionary*),  
 or  
 b) numbering is a mere graphic ordering principle and, let's say, from number 1 to 3 transitive senses are listed and from 4 to 6 are listed senses (not necessarily different from those considered under acceptations 1-3) which occur in the intransitive form (see, e.g. *Wahrig, Vox*).

3. Burzio (1986, pp. 39-40 and 75-76) remarks that those Italian ergative verbs which exhibit the affix *si* do not all behave in the same way. They can be divided into two classes represented by *rompersi* and *sbagliarsi*. Only the members of the former class have transitive alternants of the type AVB/BV. Since the two classes of pronominal verbs behave so differently, to unify them under the label *ergative* is meaningful in the domain of a generative grammar, but I wonder whether it has effective explanatory power in a bilingual dictionary. Fontenelle-Vanandroye (1989) and the contributions of Fontenelle and Antelmi-Roventini in this volume show that ergative verbs in French, Italian and English can be retrieved by analyzing dictionary definitions together with well defined grammar codes (Fontenelle uses [T1; I0] in LDOCE, for instance). They are favourable to the assignment of [+ergative] trait to verbs, but they are interested in exploiting machine-readable dictionaries as databases for natural language processing, an aspect of dictionary use which is different from that which I am discussing here.

It is evident that the true opposition is between 1, which is a more syntactic-distributionally and homonymically oriented approach, and 2a, which reflects a semantic and polysemic approach. As for 2b, it can be considered a notational variant of 1, since it has the same syntactic approach, though it seems less homonymic than 1.

It can be said that 2a was widespread in the past and is presently dominating learners' dictionaries of English. In fact the English language has only four pronominal verbs or *obligatory reflexive verbs* as Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1972, p. 211) call *absent oneself (from)*, *avail oneself (of)*, *betake oneself*, *pride oneself*. Jaspersen (1933, p. 112) commented on the tendency to get rid of reflexive pronouns whenever no ambiguity is to be feared (e.g. *I washed, dressed and shaved, and then felt infinitely better*) and the peculiar absence of pronominal verbs in English in the following way: «It is natural that the tendency to use verbs without the reflexive pronouns is stronger in English, where these pronouns are heavy and cumbersome, than in other languages where the corresponding forms are short and light (French *se*, German *sich*, etc.)». <sup>4</sup>

Microstructure 2a is seldom adopted in monolingual dictionaries of the Romance languages, mainly because intransitive and transitive uses of the «same» verb almost always involve remarkable differences in meaning and also pronominal forms may have different meanings. Of course, all the more, one could say, type 2a is not found in bilingual dictionaries of Romance languages which generally tend to uncluster meanings also when there is no surface pretext and feel free to do so when even the *signifiant* of the verb changes (i.e. takes a pronominal article).

It is not possible to group the meaning of French intransitive *ruer* «to kick referring to horses and persons» and «its» pronominal form *se ruer* «to throw oneself on», and the transitive *presser* «to squeeze» and «its» intransitive pronominal form *se presser* «to hurry up». I wonder whether it might be possible to group transitive *presser* and its true reflexive use *se presser contre quelqu'un* «to squeeze up against somebody».

This is exactly what supporters of microstructure 2a generally claim: type 1 is space-and-time consuming above all concerning verbs whose *si*, *se*, *sich* forms don't differ in meaning so much from forms without such pronouns. In my opinion this position can be accepted in certain cases for monolingual dictionaries: in fact, sometimes we do find reflexive forms grouped under transitive acceptations, and, when there are no differences in meaning, pronominal forms together with intransitive acceptations (see, e.g. *Vocabolario Treccani* in 4 volumes and De Felice-Duro, 1976) which often have 2a verb microstructures mixed with type 1 verb entries).

For instance, both dictionaries deal first with transitive *indurire* «to harden» and then group the intransitive *indurire* and the intransitive pronominal form *indurirsi*, because their meaning is the same: «to set, solidify». But as you can easily check with a native speaker, when you have such redundant couplets there is a tendency towards remotivation. Speakers differentiate their use, if not their meaning: often the intransitive verb belongs to a more literary, written register, while the intransitive pronominal verb is felt as the unmarked use.

4. In his *Grammatica italiana*, probably the most corpus-sensitive among recent important Italian grammars, Serianni (1989, p. 389) remarks that in Ancient Italian and in literary texts up to the XIXth century verbs having both the intransitive and the intransitive pronominal form (with the same meaning) were far more numerous than in present standard Italian: for instance, of the couplets *essere/essersi*, *dormire/dormirsi*, *giacere/giacersi*, *tacere/tacersi* today Italian uses only the non-pronominal verb.

With these considerations in mind and having appreciated very much not only the plea but the evidence put forward in Atkins, Kegl, Levin (1988) in favour of a better account of the semantic-syntactic interdependencies in bilingual entries, I have tried to reconsider whether the compact ranks of type 1 microstructures with regard to the treatment of pronominal verbs in bilingual dictionaries are only determined by lexicographic habit or whether such a homonymic approach is sensible and in the end more user-friendly than a microstructure built according to type 2 claims.

I have tried to figure out a type 2 version of a bilingual entry for *casser-se casser*, *rompere-rompersi*, *presser-se presser*, and *sbagliare-sbagliarsi* and have come to the conclusion that, since, as I previously mentioned, not all pronominal verbs are birds of a feather:

a) we should in any case have at least two different microstructures for Italian and French verbs; verbs such as *se presser* or *sbrigarsi* cannot do without a type 1 microstructure because they are not the same verb as *presser* and *sbrigare*. There will be meanings which belong only to the pronominal form and cannot be grouped. Is it desirable that verbs follow more than one type of microstructure in the same half of the bilingual dictionary? And, what's more, so radically different microstructures as type 1 and type 2?

b) for an Italian or a French user translating into English the only notable advantage would be that he/she would be compelled to observe that an English verb translating a both non-pronominal and pronominal verb is often the same; or rather, it is the same verb form occurring in different syntactic patterns. Space, as a result, is not saved, because examples will uncluster what meaning acceptation has clustered. There remains the undeniable pedagogical value of semantic clustering, but I wonder whether a bilingual dictionary really has such a goal. I think that this is a goal for a monolingual learner's dictionary and that, in any case, with regard to pronominal - non-pronominal couplets, the cost of such a pedagogical goal is not rewarding in terms of user-friendly microstructure design.

c) as for English users translating into French or Italian, I noticed that also bilingual dictionaries printed in GB uncluster, i.e. divide transitive from intransitive meanings. Foreign language translations of transitive and intransitive forms of the «same» English verb are usually so different that it is extremely difficult to sketch a readable 2a microstructure for a printed bilingual dictionary (and in fact in their efforts to amend the entry for *bake* in CREFD, Atkins, Kegl and Levin (1988) never mention such a solution. It is true that CREFD is meant to serve both the French and English market and therefore a 2a microstructure for *bake* appears immediately unsuitable for a French user, but I doubt that the three authors thought of sketching a type 2a microstructure for a dictionary meant only for an English audience.)

I am aware that bilingual microstructures devoted to verbs usually follow the lexicographic tradition of each language, but I have also noticed that, when a change is made, it is not from 1 to 2; it is likely to be from 2 (a or b) to 1, above all when the monolingual lexicography of the country concerned adopts the verb microstructures of type 1. An interesting instance of such a change is offered by the *Dizionario inglese-italiano, italiano-inglese* (SEI Torino, 1977) adapted by Malcolm Skey from OALD (1963 and 1974). In Skey's dictionary an entry such as *hang* has two blocks, one for two transitive acceptations and another for two intransitive acceptations, while the original OALD entry had: *hang* v.t. & i., that is to say a 2a microstructure.

Such a shift from a semantic arrangement to a syntactic-distributional arrange-

ment cannot be viewed only as an adaptation to Italian lexicographic habits. We have to look at it in the framework of the great debate about the use of the bilingual dictionary: since bilingual dictionaries are mainly used for comprehension, for translating from L2, it is convenient to arrange microstructures according to possible linguistic environments of the foreign word (whose meaning is unknown to the reader, while the linguistic context is given in the text) more than by following meaning groups.

Van Dale bilingual dictionaries are, for the moment, alone in adopting a distributionalist approach for every part of speech and not only for verbs (see, for instance, Van Dale *Groot woordenboek Nedertans-Frans*, Van Dale, Utrecht, 1985).<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. Some conclusions

I) Type 1 microstructure is the most suitable for pronominal verbs, because in most cases the pronominal form of the verb X can be considered as a different verb Y.

II) In bilingual dictionaries it is better to have a full sub-entry for pronominal infinitives (as in CREFD, Skey); it helps to convey the idea that sometimes it is really different from the non-pronominal form.

III) When a verb occurs only in the pronominal form, its infinitive used as headword ought to be lemmatized in the pronominal form (e.g. Italian *vergognarsi e pentirsi*), also when, as in German and French, the position of *se, sich* in front of the verb leads to solutions similar to the one adopted by the *Robert. Collins French-English English-French Dictionary* (2nd edition, 1987), where we find the headword *apparenter (s')*. (The fact that in Italian causative constructions pronominal verbs lose the pronoun is not sufficient in my opinion to create a lemma that does not exist outside such peculiar environments).

IV) The use of the term «*reflexive*» for any type of verb with a pronoun should be abandoned, above all for those language pairs where one of the languages has well-known different labels such as Italian *intransitivo pronominale* or French *verbe pronominal. Pronominal verb*, being a sort of dummy label, could be adopted as an international label in every language which has to deal with lexicalized pronominal verbs.

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5. Pronominal and reflexive verbs are therefore listed as combinations of the entry with pronouns. The fact that verbs which are always and only pronominal are lemmatized without *zich* is a sort of inconsistency in a work which prides itself upon a distributionalist approach. The entry *schamen* «be ashamed» is labelled <wk.wv ; zich ~ > «reflexive verb; oneself - » to underline that with *schamen* the particle *zich* is obligatory. It would be better to lemmatize *zich schamen*, since this is the way in which such a verb always occurs.

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