

English Reflexives: A Typological Novelty?

We summarize an ‘exaptationist’ view of the historical creation of reflexive (-self) pronouns in English. *Him+self*, etc. come into existence as words only in the 13th cent., ‘selected’ for their contrast function; they are not prominent in local binding, which is done 80% of the time by unmarked pronouns until the 16th cent. when *-self* forms come to dominate local binding quickly 80% of the time. I summarize massive data in support of the historical pattern. Unique evidence for this view is the sudden demise of pleonastic objects (*He laid him on the bier*) and the presence in ModEng of (1) non-argument *-self* forms, and (2) *-self* forms with long distance antecedents in Inherently Contrastive Expressions: Coordinations, Only DPs, Comparative DPs and Exception DPs (*Each student tackled a problem that no one but himself and the teacher could solve*). I argue the creation of *-self* forms, like that of *what(so)ever* forms, is not an instance of grammaticalization or of reanalysis. The unit of change here is the word, not structures. Semantic weakening does not occur initially in the 1200s, and phonological reduction precedes the semantic weakening of the 1500s. Rather it is the creation of a new class of words by an independent and widespread process of Function Word Proclisis, whose distributional and interpretative properties are predicted by two general principles of change B Inertia and Decay, and two language general interpretative properties, Anti-synonymy, Constituency Interpretation.