

Handout: Reflexivverben

Reflexive verbs in German are really quite simple. Like many other languages, German has some verbs that require a reflexive pronoun to complete a sentence. “Reflexive” simply means that the pronoun refers back to the subject of the sentence. We do this in English, too, although German has many more reflexive verbs than English. Compare the following:

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| Ich wasche <u>das Auto</u> . | NOT REFLEXIVE: <i>I’m washing the car.</i> |
| Ich wasche <u>mich</u> . | REFLEXIVE: <i>I’m washing myself.</i> |

There are many verbs in German that require a reflexive pronoun where their English counterparts do not. Examine the following:

| | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Ich ziehe <u>mich</u> an. | <i>I’m getting dressed.</i> |
| Ich schminke <u>mich</u> . | <i>I’m putting on makeup.</i> |
| Ich rasiere <u>mich</u> . | <i>I’m shaving.</i> |
| Ich entspanne <u>mich</u> . | <i>I’m relaxing.</i> |

These verbs do not form complete sentences without an object -- for our purposes, the reflexive pronoun. “*Ich ziehe an*” does not make any sense in German, because it’s not stated WHAT you’re putting clothes onto.

Many reflexive verbs in German take **accusative** reflexive pronouns. Quite simply, these pronouns function as direct objects in the sentence. *What am I washing?* -- *Myself*, so: *Ich wasche mich*. If the action of the verb reflects directly back to the subject, then the reflexive pronoun will be accusative.

Some reflexive verbs, though, require a **dative** reflexive pronoun. These pronouns function as indirect objects, because there is some other element in the sentence that is the direct object. Most often, the direct object is a body part or piece of clothing that belongs to the subject. Compare the following:

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Ich ziehe <u>mich</u> an. | ACCUSATIVE: <i>I’m getting dressed.</i> |
| Ich ziehe <u>mir</u> einen Mantel an. | DATIVE: <i>I’m putting on a coat.</i> |
| Ich wasche <u>mich</u> . | ACCUSATIVE: <i>I’m washing myself.</i> |
| Ich wasche <u>mir</u> die Hände. | DATIVE: <i>I’m washing my hands.</i> |
| Rasierst du <u>dich</u> ? | ACCUSATIVE: <i>Are you shaving (yourself)?</i> |
| Rasierst du <u>dir</u> die Beine? | DATIVE: <i>Are you shaving your legs?</i> |

When you’re trying to decide whether to use an **accusative** or **dative** reflexive pronoun, look at the sentence and determine if there is another element (such as a body part) that is acting as the direct object. If so, then the reflexive pronoun will be dative (the indirect object). Otherwise, if there is no other element in the sentence, the reflexive pronoun must be accusative.

The following is a chart of the accusative and dative reflexive pronouns in German. Notice that for the most part, these pronouns are the same as the object pronouns (*dich, uns*, etc.). Only the third-person forms (*sich*) are new to you. Also notice that the only differences between dative and accusative forms are in the first (*mich-mir*) and second (*du-dir*) singular persons.

| NOM | AKK | DAT | NOM | AKK | DAT |
|----------|-----------|------|----------|-----------|------|
| ich..... | mich..... | mir | wir..... | uns..... | uns |
| du..... | dich..... | dir | ihr..... | euch..... | euch |
| er..... | sich..... | sich | sie..... | sich..... | sich |
| sie..... | sich..... | sich | Sie..... | sich..... | sich |
| es..... | sich..... | sich | | | |

Usage notes:

Body parts do not take a possessive adjective. Unlike English, where we say “I’m washing MY hands”, when a reflexive pronoun

is used in German, it already indicates to whom the body parts belong, so there is no possessive adjective used. It is not only redundant but also wrong to use a possessive here.

Ich wasche mir die Hände.

I'm washing (my) hands.

Ich putze mir die Zähne.

I'm brushing (my) teeth.

Direct objects with reflexive pronouns. Although the general rule-of-thumb is that reflexive pronouns are dative when a body part or article of clothing is specified, please be aware that there are other types of nouns that can function as direct objects, thus making the reflexive pronoun dative. For example:

Ich koche mir Kaffee.

I'm making myself coffee.

Ich sehe mir einen Film an.

I'm watching (myself) a movie.

Word order:

In statements, the reflexive pronoun should occur directly after the conjugated verb, or as close to the subject as possible (while maintaining verb-second word order).

Ich wasche mir jeden Tag die Haare.

Jeden Tag wasche ich mir die Haare.

Ich habe mir heute die Haare gewaschen.

Ich kann mir heute die Haare nicht waschen.

In questions, the same rule applies: the reflexive pronoun stays as close to the subject as possible, allowing for correct verb placement.

Putzt du dir jetzt die Zähne?

Soll ich mir die Zähne putzen?

Hast du dir die Zähne geputzt?

When proper names are used in a sentence, it is possible to move the reflexive pronoun even further forward in the sentence than normal. However, standard word order is also possible, so if in doubt, simply keep the reflexive pronoun in its normal position.

Ärgert Karl sich?

(normal position)

Ärgert sich Karl?

(alternate, equally possible position)

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