

Grammar 17—Reflexive Verbs

To understand reflexive verbs we must first understand the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs. A verb is transitive when it has a direct object which is different from its grammatical subject. (The action is transferred.) Here are some sentences with transitive verbs:

He ate the sandwich.
In this room we age the cheese.
The barber shaved me.

Compare them to these sentences with intransitive verbs:

I ate at 8 o'clock.
He has aged.
I shaved.
I slept.

Notice that in English the same verb can often be used transitively and intransitively without giving the listener any clue. He is expected to analyze the context and figure it out. But in a few cases we do insert a clue in the form of something called a reflexive pronoun. Sometimes this pronoun takes the form of a prefix:

I shaved myself.
The ship self-destroyed.
The ship auto-destroyed.
He doubts himself.

Notice that the reflexive pronoun reflects the action back upon the actor. In Russian the reflexive pronoun is себя. It is generally reduced to a suffix of the verb, either -ся when the verb ends in a consonant or soft sign and or -сь when it ends in a vowel.

Adding a reflexive suffix to a Russian transitive verb can have several possible implications:

Action Literally Performed on Self

Он помылся и побрился.	He washed and shaved.
Он собрался.	He got ready.

Mutual or Reciprocal Action

Они познакомились.	They became acquainted.
Они встречались.	They dated.
Они поженились.	They got married.

Passive Grammatical Subject is Really Direct Object

Пока готовился ковчег...	While the ark was a preparing... (1 Peter 3:20)
Хлеб запекается.	The bread is baking.

Futile or Poorly Directed Action

Он бился.	He was hitting.
Он брыкался.	He was kicking.