

Reflexive Verbs

Learning to “know thyself” in Spanish

Introduction

One special aspect of many languages that come from Latin is a topic called **reflexivity**.

Reflexive verbs are verbs that require the action to refer back to the person or thing doing the action.

While this might seem pretty complicated, we can look to math to help us visualize “reflexivity” or “reflexive verbs”:

In math, the “reflexive property” just means that any given number is equal to itself.

Reflexive Property of Equality

$$a = a$$

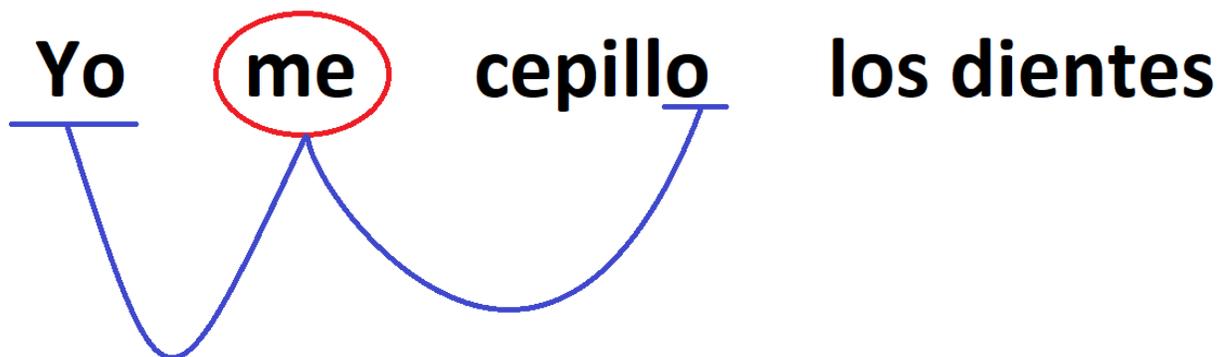
$$9.1 = 9.1$$

In Spanish, something similar happens with reflexive verbs.

Referring back to the subject

Instead of “ $a = a$ ”, Spanish has pairs of subject pronouns and object pronouns that refer **to the same person or thing**.

Here is an example of one of those typical reflexive verbs with its two pronouns at the start:



In English, this sentence transliterates to:

I (to myself) brush the teeth.

In Spanish, the “(to myself)” part is **not optional** with reflexive verbs. You **must** have it.

But you may be wondering....

Which pronouns go together?

Here is a list of all of the subject pronouns and which object pronouns they go with:

Subject pronoun		Object pronoun
yo	goes with	me
tú	goes with	te
él	goes with	se
ella	goes with	se
ellos/ellas	goes with	se
usted	goes with	se
ustedes	goes with	se
nosotros	goes with	nos

Wait, how will I know which verb is reflexive and which isn't?

Normally, in your Spanish homework, you can notice that a verb is reflexive if it has the generic pronoun "se" at the end of it.

Here's a common example that you might see in your Spanish homework:

El hombre _____ (cepillarse) los dientes.

In a grammatical sense, though, you can get an *intuition* for which verbs are reflexive and which are not by asking yourself:

Do I do this to myself?

Let's test this out with some examples in Spanish:

Verb	Do I do it <u>to</u> myself?	Is it reflexive in Spanish?	The verb in Spanish
To wash your hands	Yes	Yes	Lav <u>arse</u> las manos
To wash your car	No	No	Lavar el carro
To brush your teeth	Yes	Yes	Cepill <u>arse</u> los dientes
To dress yourself	Yes	Yes	Vestir <u>se</u>

Take notice that **all of the verbs in blue** end in "se". This means they are reflexive!

The test works, and it works no matter who the subject is.

Let's say the subject is "Juan", and the verb is "bathing yourself" or "taking a shower".

Is this something he does to **himself**?

The answer is yes!

The final step in the process

Once you recognize that a verb is reflexive, you've already done **half the work**.

The other half of the work is figuring out who the subject is and choosing the right **object pronoun** that goes with it.

Maybe in your homework you will see a sentence like this:

Mi hermana _____ (lavarse) las manos antes de comer.

The **subject** will normally be the word or words *before* the verb. In this case, that's the words "mi hermana". Now, "hermana" is a "she", and the word for "she" in Spanish is "ella". If we look at our table on the previous page...

ella	goes with	se
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we see that "ella" goes with "se".

So, we separate the "se" from the "lavarse", and we put a "se" where we normally put object pronouns in Spanish: **before the conjugated verb**.

Then, we conjugate "lavar" like we normally would for a third person singular, and we come up with "lava".

Now, we have our answer:

Mi hermana se lava las manos antes de comer.

Summary

Reflexive verbs in Spanish boil down to **the self**, whoever that might be. In other words, these are verbs where the subject is the same as the object of the sentence. Ultimately, these are actions that we do **to ourselves**, even if we don't say it like that in English.

Here are the tips that we talked about in this resource that can help you along the way:

1. In your homework, look for the "se" at the end of a verb. This normally tells you it's reflexive.
2. If you're unsure if a verb is reflexive, ask yourself, "Do I do this to myself?" If the answer is yes, it's a reflexive verb.
3. Remember to put the object pronoun where we normally would in Spanish: **before the conjugated verb**.

And if you would like **extra practice**, [click this link](#) to practice a quiz.¹

¹ If you're using the print version of this resource, the link referred to here is:
<https://www.spanishdict.com/quizzes/85/reflexive-verbs-and-reflexive-pronouns>