

Reflexive Verbs (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 das Auto.

NOT REFLEXIVE: *I'm washing the car.*

Ich wasche mir.

REFLEXIVE: *I'm washing myself.*

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

Ich ziehe mir an.

I'm getting dressed.

Ich schminke mir.

I'm putting on makeup.

Ich rasiere mir.

I'm shaving.

Ich entspanne mir.

I'm relaxing.

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 mich an. ACCUSATIVE: *I'm getting dressed.*

Ich ziehe mir einen Mantel an. DATIVE: *I'm putting on a coat.*

Ich wasche mich. ACCUSATIVE: *I'm washing myself.*

Ich wasche mir die Hände. DATIVE: *I'm washing my hands.*

Rasierst du dich? ACCUSATIVE: Are you shaving (yourself)?

Rasierst du dir die Beine? DATIVE: Are you shaving your legs?

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.

<u>NOM</u>	<u>AKK</u>	<u>DAT</u>	<u>NOM</u>	<u>AKK</u>	<u>DAT</u>
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 <u>die</u> Hände.	<i>I’m washing (my) hands.</i>
Ich putze mir <u>die</u> Zähne.	<i>I’m brushing (my) teeth.</i>

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 <u>mir</u> Kaffee.	<i>I’m making myself coffee.</i>
Ich sehe <u>mir</u> einen Film an.	<i>I’m watching (myself) a movie.</i>

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 <u>mir</u> jeden Tag die Haare.
Jeden Tag wasche ich <u>mir</u> die Haare.
Ich habe <u>mir</u> heute die Haare gewaschen.
Ich kann <u>mir</u> 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 <u>dir</u> jetzt die Zähne?
Soll ich <u>mir</u> 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)*