2.1.2 Reflexivity and reciprocity

自 zi^4 'self'

自 zi^4 is a productive prefix that carries the meaning of 'self'. In some contexts it is "translatable as 'auto-' as in 自動 [zi^4dong^4] 'move of its own accord, – automatic; on one's own initiative'..." (Chao 1968:407). As Ōta (1987:111) notes, in spite of its pronominal meaning, 自 zi^4 is purely adverbial, and has never functioned as an independent subject or object; 己 ji^3 was used in Classical Chinese where an independent pronoun for 'self' was required. In modern Mandarin, 自己 zi^4ji^3 is used pronominally in syntactic constructions.

自 zi^4 as a verb prefix has two possible interpretations, depending on context: it may be only the subject, or it may be both the subject and object of the verb. This can be illustrated with syntactic expansions of the meanings the compounds:

(1) 自己 zi^4ji^3 'self' + V
(2) 自己 zi^4ji^3 'self' + V + 自己 zi^4ji^3 'self'

It does not seem possible for the 'self' in 自 zi^4 + V to be only the object; the whole idea of 自 zi^4 as a verbal prefix is that one initiates something oneself (he or she is the agent or actor). The results of the action do not necessarily play out on the initiator (i.e. he or she is not necessarily the recipient or patient), though they in some cases may. 自 zi^4 'self' + V is a Classical Chinese syntactic pattern, used mainly in modern Mandarin to achieve stylistic conciseness and formality, as mentioned in the preceding regarding 獨處 du^2chu^3 'to spend time alone'.

In the following examples, 'self' is only the subject. The constructions may stand alone or take an additional argument in the role of direct or oblique object:

自居 zi^4ju^1 = 自己住 (Ø or 在台北) $zi^4ji^3 zhu^4$ ($zai^4 tai^2bei^3$)
(self resides)
i.e. 'to live by oneself/alone (in Taipei)'

自知 zi^4zhi^1 = 自己知道 (Ø or 這件事) $zi^4ji^3 zhi^1dao^4$ ($zhe^4jian^4shi^4$)
(self knows)
'to know within oneself (about this matter)'

自購 zi^4gou^4 = 自己買 (Ø or 房子) $zi^4ji^{3(2)} mai^3$ ($fang^2zi$)
(self buys)
to buy (a home) oneself'

In the following examples, 'self' is both subject and object:

自殺 zi^4sha^1 = 自己殺自己 $zi^4ji^3 sha^1 zi^4ji^3$
(self kills self)
'to commit suicide'

自稱 zi^4cheng^1 = 自己稱呼自己 $zi^4ji^3 cheng^1hu^1 zi^4ji^3$
(self calls self)
'to call oneself...'

自治 zi^4zhi^4 = 自己治理自己 $zi^4ji^3 zhi^4li^3 zi^4ji^3$
(self governs self)
'to be autonomous'

The template 自 zi^4 'self' + V enjoys considerable though not unlimited productivity. One limitation is that the verbs it affixes onto are generally monosyllabic. If the verb is disyllabic, a kind of "syllabic harmony" (on the analogy of "vowel harmony") is required, and a disyllabic word for 'self', 自我 zi^4wo^3 [self + I] will usually be used instead; thus: 自我催眠 $zi^4wo^3cui^1mian^2$ [(self + I) + (to urge + to sleep)] 'self-hypnosis; to practice self-hypnosis; to hypnotize oneself'; 自我欺騙 $zi^4wo^3qi^1pian^4$ [(self + I) + (to deceive + to cheat)] 'self-deception; to deceive oneself'; 自我陶醉 $zi^4wo^3tao^2zui^4$ [(self + I) + (happy + drunk)] 'to be full of oneself'; 自我吹噓 $zi^4wo^3chui^1xu^1$ [(self + I) + (to blow + to breathe out slowly)]

'to praise oneself or others, to boast'. Note how the *self-* form is used here in the English nominal but not verbal form, though verbal forms such as *self-medicate* are also used in English. In Chinese the same collocation may be either nominal or verbal depending on context. Some of these four-syllable formations have a disyllabic equivalent, e.g. 自我欺骗 $zi^4wo^3qi^1pian^4$ 'to deceive oneself' can be shortened to 自欺 zi^4qi^1 in some contexts; others exist only in the four-syllable format, e.g. 自我介绍 $zi^4wo^3jie^4shao^4$ [(self + I) + (to introduce + to introduce)] 'to introduce oneself, give a self-introduction'.

Examples in which 自 zi^4 is only the subject:

(1) (a) 自决 zi^4jue^2 [self + to decide] 'self-determination; to determine or decide s.t. oneself'; 自學 zi^4xue^2 [self + to study] 'to study on one's own'; 自供 zi^4gong^1 [self + to provide] 'to provide s.t. oneself'; 自覺 zi^4jue^2 [self + to be aware] 'to be conscious, aware of'; 自選 zi^4xuan^3 [self + to choose] 'to choose, elect oneself'; 自籌 zi^4chou^2 [self + to prepare, raise funds] 'to prepare s.t. oneself'; 自成 zi^4cheng^2 [self + to become] 'to become [s.t. else] by oneself, on one's own power'; 自立 zi^4li^4 [self + to establish] 'to establish oneself independently'; 自理 zi^4li^3 [self + to manage] 'to take care of s.t. oneself'; 自製 zi^4zhi^4 [self + to make, produce, manufacture] 'to produce s.t. oneself'.

Examples in which 自 zi^4 is both subject and object:

(4) (b) 自重 zi^4zhong^4 [self + to consider important] → self considers- important self → 'to comport oneself well'; 自盡 zi^4jin^4 [self + to exhaust] → self exhausts self → 'to commit suicide'; 自救 zi^4jiu^4 [self + to save] → self saves self → 'to save oneself'; 自省 zi^4xing^3 [self + to examine] → self examines self → 'to examine oneself and one's motives'; 自轉 zi^4zhuan^4 [self + to turn] → self turns self → 'to rotate'; 自乘 zi^4cheng^2 [self + to multiply] → self multiplies self → 'to multiply a number by itself'; 自首 zi^4shou^3 [self + to confess] → self confesses self → 'to turn oneself in and confess'; 自衛 zi^4wei^4 [self + to protect] → self protects self → 'to defend oneself'.