2.1.2 Reflexivity and reciprocity

自 zi4 ‘self’
自 zi4 is a productive prefix that carries the meaning of ‘self’. In some contexts it is “translatable as ‘auto-’ as in 自動 [zi4 dong4] ‘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 zi4 is purely adverbial, and has never functioned as an independent subject or object; 己 ji3 was used in Classical Chinese where an independent pronoun for ‘self’ was required. In modern Mandarin, 自己 zi4 ji3 is used pronominally in syntactic constructions.

自 zi4 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 zi4 ji3 ‘self’ + V
(2) 自己 zi4 ji3 ‘self’ + V + 自己 zi4 ‘self’

It does not seem possible for the ‘self’ in 自 zi4 + V to be only the object; the whole idea of 自 zi4 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 zi4 ‘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 du4 chu1 ‘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 zi4 ju4 = 自己住 (Ø or 在台北) zi4 ji3 zhu4 (zai4 tai4 bei3)
(= 自己住 (zai4 bei3) ‘to live by oneself/alone (in Taipei)’)

自知 zi4 zhi4 = 自己知道 (Ø or 這件事) zi4 ji3 dao4 (zhe4 jian4 shi4)
(= 自己知道 (zhe4 jian4 shi4) ‘to know within oneself (about this matter)’)

自購 zi4 gou4 = 自己買 (Ø or 房子) zi4 ji3 mai3 (fang4 zi)
(= 自己買 (fang4 zi) ‘to buy (a home) oneself’)

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

自殺 zi4 sha1 = 自己殺自己 zi4 ji3 sha1 zi4 ji3
(= 自己殺自己 zi4 ji3 ‘to commit suicide’)

自稱 zi4 cheng1 = 自己稱呼自己 zi4 ji3 cheng1 hu1 zi4 ji3
(= 自己稱呼自己 zi4 ji3 ‘to call oneself...’)

自治 zi4 zhi4 = 自己治理自己 zi4 ji3 li4 zi4 ji3
(= 自己治理自己 zi4 ji3 ‘to be autonomous’)

The template 自 zi4 ‘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 zi4 wo3 [self + I] will usually be used instead; thus: 自我催眠 zi4 wo3 cu1 mian2 [(self + I) + (to urge + to sleep)] ‘self-hypnosis; to practice self-hypnosis; to hypnotize oneself’; 自我欺騙 zi4 wo3 qi1 pian1 [(self + I) + (to deceive + to cheat)] ‘self-deception; to deceive oneself’; 自我陶醉 zi4 wo3 tao2 zu4 [(self + I) + (happy + drunk)] ‘to be full of oneself’; 自我吹噓 zi4 wo3 chu1 xu1 [(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 *zi4 wo3 qi1 pian4* ‘to deceive oneself’ can be shortened to 自欺 *zi4 qi1* in some contexts; others exist only in the four-syllable format, e.g. 自我介绍 *zi4 wo2 jie1 shao4* [(self + I) + (to introduce + to introduce)] ‘to introduce oneself, give a self-introduction’.

Examples in which 自 *zi4* is only the subject:

(1) (a) 自決 *zi4 jue2* [self + to decide] ‘self-determination; to determine or decide s.t. oneself’; 自學 *zi4 xue2* [self + to study] ‘to study on one’s own’; 自供 *zi4 gong1* [self + to provide] ‘to provide s.t. oneself’; 自覺 *zi4 jue2* [self + to be aware] ‘to be conscious, aware of’; 自選 *zi4 xuan3* [self + to choose] ‘to choose, elect oneself’; 自籌 *zi4 chou2* [self + to prepare, raise funds] ‘to prepare s.t. oneself’; 自成 *zi4 cheng2* [self + to become] ‘to become [s.t. else] by oneself, on one’s own power’; 自立 *zi4 li4* [self + to establish] ‘to establish oneself independently’; 自理 *zi4 li4* [self + to manage] ‘to take care of s.t. oneself’; 自製 *zi4 zhi4* [self + to make, produce, manufacture] ‘to produce s.t. oneself’.

Examples in which 自 *zi4* is both subject and object:

(4) (b) 自重 *zi4 zhong4* [self + to consider important] → self considers important self → ‘to comport oneself well’; 自盡 *zi4 jin4* [self + to exhaust] → self exhausts self → ‘to commit suicide’; 自救 *zi4 jiu4* [self + to save] → self saves self → ‘to save oneself’; 自省 *zi4 xing3* [self + to examine] → self examines self → ‘to examine oneself and one’s motives’; 自轉 *zi4 zhu4an* [self + to turn] → self turns self → ‘to rotate’; 自乘 *zi4 cheng2* [self + to multiply] → self multiplies self → ‘to multiply a number by itself’; 自首 *zi4 shou3* [self + to confess] → self confesses self → ‘to turn oneself in and confess’; 自衛 *zi4 wei4* [self + to protect] → self protects self → ‘to defend oneself’.