Causality, Commitativity, Contrastivity, and Selfhood
Wei-Tien Dylan Tsai
National Tsing Hua University

When people talk about reflexives, they often think of two arguments in an anaphoric and/or coargumental relation. This paper argues that adverbials can also participate in such kind of relationship, but with far greater range of interpretative possibilities, centering on the notion of "selfhood". Moreover, their behavior can be accommodated by a general theory of reflexivity, given an extension of the traditional view that reflexive-marking involves argument reduction. First a brief rundown of the basic facts. The distribution of Chinese adverbial *ziji* 'self' can be largely delimited by a modal such as *ken* 'willing', as shown by the interpretive contrast between (1) and (2):

1. Akiu *ziji ken* chuli zhe-jian shi.
   Akiu self willing handle this-CL matter
   'Akiu is willing to handle this matter of his own accord.'
2. Akiu *ken ziji* chuli zhe-jian shi.
   Akiu willing self handle this-CL matter
   'Akiu is willing to handle this matter by himself.'

We call the premodal one an "outer" reflexive, and the postmodal one an "inner" reflexive. The outer *ziji* is interpreted as 'of his own accord', whereas the inner one means 'by himself' or 'alone'. Accordingly, the two sentences have distinct semantics: (1) is true if Akiu is willing to handle this matter without others' persuasion; (2) is true if Akiu is willing to handle this matter without others’ company. Inner reflexives further differ from their outer counterparts in requiring an agentive subject. For instance, sentient verbs like *ku* 'cry' are incompatible with inner *ziji*, as shown by the contrast between (3a,b). By contrast, unergatives with an agentive subject allow both the outer and inner readings, as in (4a,b):

3. (3a) bu zhi zemme de, Akiu *ziji ku-le qilai.*
   not know how DE Akiu self cry-Inc up
   a. '(I) don't know how (that happened). Akiu started to cry without cause.'
   b. #(I) don't know how (that happened). Akiu started to cry alone.'
3. (3b) bu zhi zemme de, Akiu *ziji pao-le chuqu.*
   not know how DE Akiu self run-Inc out
   a. '(I) don't know how (that happened). Akiu ran out on his own initiative.'
   b. '(I) don't know how (that happened). Akiu ran out by himself.'

This inner-outer asymmetry obtains in passive, unaccusative, locative-existential, and psyche verb constructions, where the subject is typically not an agent.

An even more interesting case can be found in unaccusatives with transitive alternates: In (5), an external force is required in the context to license outer reflexive-marking, where the readings shift to 'by nature'. In cases where there is no salient external force at work, inner *ziji* becomes compatible with such predicates, as is evident by comparing (5) with (6):

5. (5a) feng da-le, men *ziji hui* kai.
   wind big-Inc door self will open
   'When wind gets stronger, the door will open by nature.'
5. (5b) men *hui ziji* kai.
   door capable self open
   'The door is capable of opening by itself.'

Here the interpretation has shifted from 'by nature' to something related to a built-in mechanism, or even to a supernatural cause. Moreover, the future modal has turned into one of its cognates, i.e., the capability modal *hui* 'capable'. One way to look at this puzzle is to say that some sort of agentivity has been ascribed to the inanimate subject, hence the changing of modality. The supernatural reading comes out whenever we cannot provide a reasonable explanation based on our understanding of the nature of the world.

In this paper, we explore the possibility of treating adverbial *ziji* as a special kind of reflexive-marker à la Reinhart & Reuland (1993), and examine its morpho-syntactic properties from a typological point of view. By assuming that inner *ziji* adjoins to vP, we capitalize on the idea that
inner reflexive-marking reduces an optional commitative argument licensed by an agent role (cf. Reinhart 2003). It is further pointed out that, as suggested by the truth conditions of (1) and (2), reflexive adverbial construals always involve a contrastive focus. As shown by (7), inner *ziji* can be analyzed as a reflexive operator scoping over vP, and the commitative relation between the optional argument and the underlying event argument is expressed by WITH (cf. Parson 1995). What the reflexive operator does is introduce negation over the alternative set of the commitative argument, and reduce it afterwards, as illustrated in (8). The result is something like (9) as the semantics of (1):

\[
(7) \text{Self } (\exists e (\text{be-willing-to-handle } (e) \& \text{AGENT } (x, e) \& \text{THEME } (\text{this matter, } e) \\
\& \text{WITH } (x, e))) (Akiu)
\]

\[
(8) \lambda x (\exists e (\text{be-willing-to-handle } (e) \& \text{AGENT } (x, e) \& \text{THEME } (\text{this matter, } e) \\
\& \text{WITH } (x, e) \& \neg \exists y (y \neq x \& \text{WITH } (y, e))) (Akiu)
\]

\[
(9) \exists e (\text{be-willing-to-handle } (e) \& \text{AGENT } (Akiu, e) \& \text{THEME } (\text{this matter, } e) \\
\& \neg \exists y (y \neq Akiu \& \text{WITH } (y, e)))
\]

This move provides a straightforward account of the subject agentivity restriction associated with inner reflexives in that, when the subject is not an agent, there would be no optional argument to reduce. The “inner selfhood” is thus defined as contrastivity plus reduction of commitative argument.

Outer *ziji*, on the other hand, merges to TP/ModP, but not as high as CP, where logophoric construals are predominant (cf. Huang & Liu 2000). Causality plays a major role here in that it is an implicit cause argument that is subject to reduction, on the assumption that there is always a cause-effect relationship underlying every event. This intuition is implemented by posing an implicit causative predicate as part of the semantics of “outer selfhood”. With the cause argument reduced and the negation over its alternative set introduced, we have (10) and (11) as the semantics of (2) and (3) respectively, where the cause can be either an individual or an event:

\[
(10) (\exists e (\text{be-willing-to-handle } (e) \& \text{AGENT } (Akiu, e) \& \text{THEME } (\text{this matter, } e) \\
\& \neg \exists y (y \neq Akiu \& \text{CAUSE } (y, e)))
\]

\[
(11) (\exists e (\text{crying } (e) \& \text{EXPERIENCER } (Akiu, e) \& \neg \exists y (y \neq Akiu \& \text{CAUSE } (y, e)))
\]

The “outer selfhood” is thus characterized as contrastivity plus reduction of a cause argument. We therefore have a unified account of inner and outer reflexives: Namely, they both serve as reflexive operators which trigger argument reduction and contrastive construals.

To sum up, Chinese reflexive adverbials should be divided into two groups according to their syntactic distribution and semantic interpretations. In a sense, inner and outer reflexive adverbials represent a missing link between anaphors and logophors. From a cognitive point of view, *ziji* ‘self’ has been steadily abstracting away from its anaphorhood as it occurs higher and higher in syntactic projections, with the selfhood shifting from individuality to committativity and agentivity, then to causality and modality, and finally to the nature of this world, as schematized in the hierarchy (12):

\[
(12) \text{by nature } > \text{in/of oneself } > \text{by/with oneself } > \text{self}
\]

Selected References


