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The treatment of French reflexive verbs in bilingual dictionaries

Abstract

This paper arises from a preliminary study of errors made by English learners of French in the area of reflexive/ non-reflexive verb pairs such as *casser/se casser; passer/se passer*. After presenting a categorization of reflexive verbs based on Zribi-Hertz (1987) and Jones (1996), the paper identifies two areas of particular difficulty. It goes on to study these as presented in four bilingual French-English dictionaries to see how typical problem verbs are handled and how much help is given to the learner. The results are often disappointing and the paper makes some suggestions as to possible approaches, including some discussion of the use of bilingual dictionaries in ways similar to those usually associated with monolingual ones.

1. Introduction

This paper looks at some problems faced by English-speaking learners of French when using dictionaries to help them both to translate in the direction S(ource) L(anguage) ⇒ T(arget) L(anguage) and to distinguish forms and meanings in the TL. The problems concern knowing how and when to use reflexive verb forms such as *se casser*. We exclude from our study cases which pose little or no problems to learners:
(i) verbs which have a reflexive form in -*self* in English: *"they washed themselves carefully* ⇒ *ils se sont lavés avec soin"*,
(ii) reciprocal verbs: *"they love one another* ⇒ *ils s'aiment"*,
(iii) verbs which have been learnt in their reflexive form, often in set expressions: *"hurry up!* ⇒ *dépêchez-vous!; be quiet!* ⇒ *taisez-vous!"*.
The fact that *dépêcher* and *taire* exist as non-reflexive verbs as in *dépêcher quelqu'un sur place* or *taire son nom* does not generally pose a problem to learners for whom such constructions are rare and are generally acquired later, i.e. questions of frequency, as perceived by the learner, can be of importance and can lead the reflexive form to be thought of as the 'preferred' one.

We also disregard problems such as: *"to break one's leg* ⇒ *se casser la jambe"*, since the difficulty here does not simply concern the reflexive form but involves further problems concerning possessive adjectives. (Ruwet (1972) reports a remark by Kayne, saying that dictionary compilers have a (theoretical or intuitive) understanding of the differing nature of reflexive verbs and often include uses such as *"je me suis cassé le bras"* under *casser* rather than under *se casser*.)

2. Categorizations of Reflexive Verbs

2.1. Most categorizations try to make use of appropriate semantic criteria, some of which may have syntactic reflects, e.g. past participle agreement. Zribi-Hertz (1987) starts with traditional divisions, cited by Stéfanini (1962):

Pronominaux réfléchis: *Pierre se lave*

Pronominaux réciproques: *Pierre et Marie s'aiment*
Pronominaux passifs: *La vengeance est un plat qui se mange froid*
Pronominaux subjectifs (dits aussi 'intransitifs', 'moyens' ou 'neutres'): tous les autres

We have already stated that the first two categories are of no especial interest here. Zribi-Hertz sees that there is a problem with the excessively general nature of the fourth and final category and she presents a further categorization for it:

verbes essentiellement pronominaux : *s'évanouir, se repentir*
verbes figés dans un emploi réfléchi devenu homonyme de l'emploi non réfléxif : *douter/se douter, jouer/se jouer*
verbes intransitifs ayant pu s'employer *aussi* réflexivement : *mourir/se mourir*
verbes dont l'emploi réflexif apparaît comme la contre-partie 'intransitive' d'une forme transitive associée, cp : *Pierre a cassé/brisé la branche, la branche s'est brisée/cassée.*

One needs, as Zribi-Hertz says, to mention under the last category the fact that only some verbs allow a non-reflexive use with the site of the process expressed as subject: *"la branche a cassé"* but *"*la branche a brisé"*. The 'homonym/distinct lexeme' verbs can pose problems for students if they fail to recognise, or to master, the different senses (and see below cases with *passer* vs *se passer*).

2.2. Jones (1996), in a categorization based explicitly on Ruwet (1972), and if we exclude the 'réfléchi' and 'réciproque' categories, divides pronominal verbs into:

Intrinsic: *s'évanouir; se souvenir; s'écrouler*
Neutral: *s'ouvrir; se casser; se transformer*
Middle: as in — *ce vin se boit chambré; ce livre se lit facilement; cette voyelle se prononce comme...*

'Intrinsic' includes verbs similar to the 'homonym' category in Zribi-Hertz. This includes *se passer, se rendre, se comporter, s'attendre* but not *se pouvoir*, which is close in meaning to *pouvoir*, (see Zribi-Hertz's third sub-category). The 'intrinsic-always-reflexive' verbs pose problems only if students think that they have a non-reflexive form and, on the whole, they do not, since they learn the verbs in the combined '*SE* + VERB' form.

The 'neutral' category consists of intransitive verbs which all have transitive, non-reflexive counterparts. In their transitive use, they often have human agent subjects, as in *"Pierre a ouvert la porte"*, *"zut! j'ai cassé ce verre"*, etc. With the reflexives, however, no human agent may be specified: *"*la porte s'est ouverte par Pierre/le verre s'est cassé par moi"*. The agent may be understood, and may be a non-human cause, but the reflexive form is usually chosen in order to leave unspecified the agent or cause. The problem for students here is that the reflexive verbs do not occur systematically as equivalents to the transitive, non-reflexive ones. And sometimes both are possible. One can say both *"la branche a cassé"* and *"la branche s'est cassée"* but only, as we saw above, *"cela s'est brisé"*.

The 'middle' verbs, (cp. Zribi-Hertz's 'pronominaux passifs'), are somewhat similar to the 'neutral' ones but refer to general events or give general recommendations. Given that type of sense, certain consequences ensue:

(i) the equivalent active sentence will often have *on* as subject,

(ii) a modal verb may need to be added, which is not the case with verbs such as *se casser*,

(iii) the tense used will tend to be Present (or Imperfect) and 'punctual' tenses such as passé composé or passé simple will be avoided: *"cela ne se fait pas/on ne doit pas faire cela"*, *"cela se lit facilement/on peut lire cela facilement"*.

Since the equivalent English forms tend to use a passive, learners do not usually have problems here in distinguishing reflexive from non-reflexive forms. The problem is, rather, to encourage them to use the reflexive forms at all, since the passive form is grammatically correct, though in most cases totally unidiomatic: *"that simply isn't done, *cela n'est tout simplement pas fait"*.

2.3. We shall consider the problems that anglophone learners experience in two main areas:

(i) the 'intransitive/neutral' type, where it may appear to the learner that French chooses in a somewhat haphazard way which intransitive verbs (especially those which also have a transitive use) are reflexive, non-reflexive, or both; this is a particular problem where the French verb has both a reflexive and non-reflexive form with similar meanings, example: *(se) casser*.

(ii) the 'homonym/intrinsic' type, where learners may fail to distinguish the two, example: *passer/se passer*.

3. Usefulness of dictionaries and limits to grammar teaching

Grammar text books and explicit grammar teaching can handle a number of the problems connected with reflexive verbs in French. For example, there are general questions such as auxiliation with *être*, past participle agreement and word order in complex sentences (e.g. *"je ne m'en étais pas douté"*). Extensions of such teaching (or such sections in text books) can go on to point out the difference between pairs of homonyms (see 2.1) and can also warn learners against common errors (see 4). But, as several writers have pointed out (e.g. Jones, 1996), it is difficult if not impossible to predict which intransitive verbs will be reflexive and which not: the division is arbitrary, or at least is only explained by careful historical analysis. The dictionary's role is to help learners in this area, since, as is often the case, the lexis is arbitrary, and not the syntax. So explicit grammar teaching is essential but of little use in the difficult cases that concern us here. Hence the need for extensive dictionary treatment.

4. Examples of errors

4.1. Here are some examples of various verbs wrongly used. These examples are not offered as formal data, but simply as illustrations of the type of problem that a good dictionary can at least help to solve; I say 'help to solve' rather than 'solve' as there is clearly, as in all such cases, a question of what is internalized and how. The examples are not only from translation exercises: some are from 'guided free writing'. So, where there are (apparent) interference problems, these are not solely the result of students' being required to translate.

(i) Invented reflexive forms for non-reflexive verbs:

le problème qui s'apparaît   *les incidents qui s'arrivèrent*

elle s'est déménagée   *l'avis qui se revient souvent, c'est que...*

(ii) Existing reflexive form used in inappropriate context:
l'angoisse qui se monta en lui
le nombre de mariages mixtes s'augmente

(iii) Student assumes the correctness of two (direct?) objects:
cette pression se prive l'enfant moderne de la seule joie...
les communautés ... de Français et d'étrangers s'aggravent le problème

(iv) Non-reflexive form used where reflexive required:
l'écart accroît
un jeune homme qui allait battre pour sa patrie
ils peuvent concentrer sur le rugby
tout peut terminer en catastrophe

(v) In some cases, another lexical item would be possible:
certaines femmes ont décidé de battre ce concept [combattre, lutter contre]
l'âge moyen s'est abaissé au cours de cette décennie [a baissé]
ils se confrontent aux problèmes [cp. s'affrontent; X les confronte]

4.2. The first category (reflexive verb invented) contains the most interesting cases, as the student is clearly not transferring an English form, whereas the cases in (iv) represent possible interference from English: English verbs such as 'integrate, concentrate, develop, feel', etc. are rarely used with *-self* forms (except in constructions like 'feel oneself excluded'). Errors such as these show that students at this level, (mostly with some 7-8 years of French), have a (justified) feeling that many French intransitive verbs are reflexive but that it is difficult to tell which (see 3).

Other problems arise as follows:
(a) with verbs related in form but varying according to precise meaning, e.g. *battre, se battre (contre), combattre* or *baisser, se baisser, abaisser, s'abaisser*
(b) with verbs in the same semantic field but varying in derivation, with a need to distinguish precise meanings, e.g. *grandir, (s')agrandir, croître, s'accroître, augmenter.*

5. Case studies on dictionaries

In the following, we omit all transitive uses and assume that *break vt.* is translated as *casser, briser, rompre*, etc. with parallel treatment in the French-English half.
The dictionaries consulted are listed in the References.
The entries consulted are: (French-English) *casser, se casser, passer, se passer*; (English-French) *break, break off, go by, go on, happen, pass.*
Because of limited space, we shall only give selected extracts from the dictionaries, and only French examples are given from the French-English halves.

5.1. *Casser/Break*

5.1.1. *Casser*
(Se) casser: both forms are principally translated as *break, snap (off).*

OHD: *la branche a cassé sous le poids des fruits; ça casse très facilement.*
la clé s'est cassée net

Harraps: *l'assiette a cassé en tombant; cela casse comme du verre*
se casser (a): *break, snap*, e.g. of twig, string

CR: *ça casse facilement; ça casse comme du verre*
(se briser)(objet) *la tasse s'est cassée en tombant; l'anse s'est cassée; se casser net*

Lar.: Contexts [verre, chaise], [fil], [poignée]
la tige a cassé + [en deux]; [s'est détachée]
se casser net + [en deux]; [se détacher]

OHD enters *se casser* as a sub entry (III) of *casser* but there is no attempt to explain whether you can have both *casser* and *se casser* as translations for any object breaking or snapping. Likewise, Harraps gives little help to the learner. Why should the example with *assiette* use *casser*, while *se casser* applies to 'twig, string'? Is *casser* for 'smash' and *se casser* for 'break in two'? CR also gives little help in distinguishing the reflexive from the non-reflexive, and, in Larousse, 'break off' appears with the context [*poignée*] both with the reflexive and the non-reflexive verb.

5.1.2. *Break*
OHD *Break vi:* *se casser, se briser, se fracturer, se déchirer*, etc.
china breaks easily, la porcelaine se casse facilement; the vase broke in two/into a thousand pieces, le vase s'est brisé en deux/en mille morceaux
Note: *casser* (not reflexive) appears under the *vi*, but only for snooker and pool

Break off 1. (snap off) *se casser, se détacher*

Harraps *Break2 - 2 vi.:* *se casser, se briser, se rompre*
to break in two/into pieces, se casser en deux/en morceaux; the sea breaks against the rocks, la mer se brise sur les rochers

Break off 2 vi *se casser net, se détacher net*
the handle just broke off in my hand, l'anse vient de me rester dans la main

CR *Break* : 4 vi.: *(se) casser, se briser, se rompre, se fracturer*
to break in two, se casser en deux

Break off : 1 vi. *se détacher net, se casser net*

Lar. *Break vi* 1 [split into pieces - glass, furniture] *se casser, se briser*; [- branch, stick] *se casser, se rompre*; [- lace, string] *se casser*
to break apart, se casser or *se briser en morceaux; the plate broke in two, l'assiette s'est cassée en deux*
3. [become inoperable - lock, tool] *se casser*; [- machine] *tomber en panne*

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> *Break off:* vi insep
> 1 [become separated] *se détacher, se casser*
> *a branch has broken off, une branche s'est détachée (de l'arbre)*

In OHD, the intransitive use of *casser* only appears under *break off* and not under *break,* and this despite the fact that the English-French half gives examples of both (though without explanation). In Harraps, no help is given to the learner on the *casser/se casser* (or *briser/se briser*) distinction, e.g. as applied to twigs, branches, plates, etc. CR does present the intransitive translation as *(se) casser,* and so the learner is introduced to the idea that both forms are possible, but the examples do not show whether both can be used in all circumstances. In Lar., the examples mainly use the reflexive form, so there is little to say when you can use (intransitive) *casser.*

5.2. *Passer/pass; se passer/happen,* etc.

We concentrate here on senses which relate, or can relate, to TIME or EVENTS. The main translations are *pass, go by, elapse* for *passer* and *happen, occur, go on, go by, take place,* for *se passer.* Since the dictionary entries are much longer than for *casser/break,* etc., we shall indicate the type of examples that all four dictionaries give and only quote, individually, the differing cases, labels, etc.

5.2.1. *Passer/se passer*
All the dictionaries consulted give:
— for *passer,* examples such as: *deux ans/des années/la journée a/ont passé* (often + adv.); *le temps passe; cela lui passera; laisser passer qqch; passer à côté de qqch; la douleur/l'orage/la beauté passe.*
— for *se passer,* examples like: *cela s'est passé* (+ time or place, and + *bien/mal*); *que se passe-t-il?; qu'est-ce qui se passe?; il ne se passe pas de ... que ...; ça ne se passera pas comme ça!; attendre que ça/les ennuis se passe(nt); cela s'est passé* (+ adv., e.g. *agréablement*).

In OHD, the sub-entry for *passer II vi* includes: "8 (négliger); 13 (disparaître) [douleur, événement] : 17 (s'écouler) [temps]". That for *III se passer vpr* places the time/events senses first, thus: "1 (se produire) *to happen*; 2 (être situé); 3 (se dérouler) [opération, examen, négociations]; 4 (s'écouler) [période]". (This last sub-section includes an example with *soirée.*)

In Harraps, *passer 1 vi* includes: "(h) (disparaître, finir) to disappear, to cease; (i) (s'écouler) to elapse, to go by". The entry for *3 se passer vpr* gives: "(a) (se produire, arriver); (b) (cesser); (of time)".

CR gives quite a number of contexts. The entry *passer 1 vi.* includes: "e [temps]; 1 (disparaître) [couleur] [mode] [douleur] [colère] [orage] [beauté] [jeunesse]; (mourir) [personne]". For *3 se passer vpr* we have: "a (avoir lieu); (arriver) (+ many examples); b (finir) to pass off, be over".

Lar. has a sub-section under *passer vi (surtout avec être)* which reads: "D. EXPRIME UNE ÉVOLUTION DANS LE TEMPS" — very useful. The entry continues: "1 [s'écouler - temps] to pass, to go by; 2. [s'estomper] [douleur, malaise, mode, jeunesse, etc.]". Then, for *se*

passer vpi we have: "1. [s'écouler - heures, semaines] to go by, to pass (examples with *soirée* and *journée*); 2. [survenir - événement] to take place, to happen; 3. [se dérouler - dans certaines conditions] to go (off)".

A few comments on the above entries. In OHD, *deux ans* occurs as context for both reflexive and non-reflexive, with no indication of any possible distinction. In Harraps, the indication "of time" under *se passer (b)* may cause confusion. Learners need to master above all that *le temps passe* but *un événement se passe*. In CR, the cases of *se passer* with *mal/bien* are especially useful. But several dictionaries have examples of "pain, difficulty", etc. with both *passer* and *se passer*. Lar. gives no help to the learner in distinguishing between examples such as: *la journée est passée agréablement* and *la soirée s'est passée tranquillement.* Clearly, both are correct, but do they mean the same? In OHD, it seems odd to include *événement* under sense 13 of *passer* as one does not say: *un événement passe*. But it is helpful to pair *passer* with *s'écouler* and *se passer* with *arriver*. In Harraps, it is quite useful to have remarks like 'elapse', 'take place', etc. given that the main difference between *passer* and *se passer* is that between time passing and events happening.

5.2.2. *Go by/on, happen, pass*
We shall take each source entry in turn.

For *Go by* typical translations are *passer, s'écouler* and typical examples are: *"as time goes by, à mesure que le temps passe, avec le temps"*. Indications include "[time], (elapse)"CR gives as translation *(se) passer* but the examples do not include a reflexive form.

With *Go on*, typical translations are *(se) passer, se dérouler, durer*. Indications for *se passer* include "(happen, take place, elapse, pass) [time] [years]". The main distinction is between "happen, take place" = *se passer* and "elapse, pass" = *passer* and the examples reflect this: *"what's going on here?, qu'est-ce qui se passe ici?"* compared to: *"as time goes on, à mesure que le temps passe"*. Many entries make this distinction quite clear, which is extremely useful.

Moving on to *happen* we find long entries, giving as principal translations: *arriver, se passer, se produire*. The indications and contexts are: "(occur) (befall) (materialize) (go wrong) (become of)" and "[accidents]". Typical examples include: *"when/where/how did it happen?, quand/où/comment est-ce arrivé?, quand/où/comment cela s'est-il passé or produit?; what's happening?, qu'est-ce qui se passe?; whatever happens, quoi qu'il arrive; it may/can happen that, il arrive parfois que; these things happen, ce sont des choses qui arrivent, ça peut arriver; it happened ten years ago, cela s'est passé il y a dix ans; did someone see what happened?, quelqu'un a-t-il vu ce qui s'est passé ou est arrivé?; what has happened to him?,* (what has occurred?) *qu'est-ce qui lui est arrivé?;* (what has become of him?) *qu'est-ce qu'il est devenu?; if anything happens to me,* (if I die) *s'il m'arrive quelque chose; a funny thing happened to me this morning, il m'est arrivé quelque chose de bizarre ce matin; just as if nothing had happened, tout comme s'il n'était rien arrivé; I pulled the lever but nothing happened, j'ai tiré sur le manche mais il ne s'est rien passé or ça n'a rien fait; what happened next?, que s'est-il passé ensuite?; what's happening to us?, qu'est-ce qui nous arrive?"*

Looking finally at *pass*, we find as main translations: *(se) passer, avoir lieu, s'écouler, disparaître*. Equivalents include: "(go by), (happen), (take place), (elapse), (end), (disap-

pear)" and contexts are: "[time, holiday, months, years], [crisis, pain], [feeling, memory], [old order], [opportunity]".

Note, in these examples, lack of clarity on *passer* and *se passer*: "*the afternoon passed pleasantly, l'après-midi a passé* or *s'est passé agréablement; to pass unnoticed, passer inaperçu;* [Litt or Arch. etc.] *to come to pass, arriver; it came to pass that,* [Bible] *il advint que; how time passes!, comme le temps passe (vite)!; to let the opportunity pass, laisser passer l'occasion; I don't know what passed between them, je ne sais pas ce qui s'est passé entre eux; the weekend passed without surprises, le weekend s'est passé sans surprises; time passed rapidly, le temps a passé très rapidement*".

The Harraps translation under *pass: (se) passer* is not very helpful. Similarly, in CR, both *go by* and *pass b)* offer *(se) passer* as translations, without distinction. In Lar., once again, under *pass* we have a choice: *(se) passer* — more help needed.

6. General Comments

6.1. Bilingual or Monolingual Dictionaries?

Many teachers urge learners to use monolingual French dictionaries, such as *Le Petit Robert*. But such urgings often fall on deaf ears and, in any case, given that bilingual dictionaries are a principal source of language information for all learners, such volumes need to include the information required in the area of reflexive verbs.

At a first stage, that of discovering which item to use, learners can either look up the English word in order to discover if a French verb is given as a translation which is reflexive; or they can check the French verb. (E.g. in order to arrive at *se fermer*, one can either look up *shut* or *close* in the English part of the dictionary, or, already knowing *fermer* one can check for the reflexive in the French-English half.) In the cases that concern us here, it makes no sense to ask whether the dictionary is mainly a "dictionnaire de thème" or a "dictionnaire de version": the learner ideally needs the information in both halves in order to understand which form(s) to use. But since the 'entry points' when working from SL to TL are multiple (e.g. *spend, pass, happen*, etc. for *passer* and *se passer; break, crack* for *casser*), the learner will probably need to be given the required information above all in the TL entry and, in that case, the *translation* information is irrelevant. This is an important point for dictionary use, as it involves the learner using the bilingual dictionary in a way similar to a monolingual one: the problem is not one of translation alone, but involves the exact use of TL items *once identified* and, in the case of reflexive/non-reflexive pairings, the problem can be handled, and is often best handled, within a TL entry. (And translation difficulties from TL to a learner's L1 only really arise with the 'homonym' verbs.)

6.2. Information in French-English half

So, for L1 English speakers, the French-English half needs to include (or repeat) the main elements of information since, as we have seen in 6.1, the English-French half, with its multiple sources, is of restricted help (though we have found many useful contexts and indications in such sections). The learner wants to know how to use *casser* and *se casser* when both are found as translations of *break, crack*, etc. We could expect dictionaries to proceed in one of several ways when handling verbs like *(se) casser* and *(se) passer*:

(a) They could group reflexive and non-reflexive cases (other than homonyms) within one entry and give examples of use of both, e.g. the entry for *casser* would include example such as "*la branche s'est cassée*" plus a translation. Such an approach would treat the question of certain types of reflexive verb as one concerning difficult choices which need to be presented in close proximity. None of the dictionaries examined adopts this approach, at least not systematically.

(b) The reflexive and non-reflexive forms of the verb could have separate (sub-)entries and the dictionary could profit from this and include appropriate examples under both, e.g. the (sub-)entry *se casser* would give "*la branche s'est cassée*" and would cross-refer to the simple verb *casser*, maybe distinguishing exact senses through further indications or examples. This approach would make use of the double entry to distinguish and compare, and thus to re-inforce, indicating whether or not the reflexive and non-reflexive examples are identical in meaning and collocational use.
Most dictionaries place reflexive verbs in a sub-entry, but it is rare to find any cross-references or, more important, indications of how to distinguish meanings.

(c) Where the two sub-entries are separate, without cross-references, one could still help the learner by "tagging" intransitive verbs with a symbol indicating that they do not have a reflexive form, e.g. 'v.intr. non-refl.'. So, the entry *arriver* would show that there is no **s'arriver*; and that for *(se) briser* there is no *vi. briser*.

The final decision on presentation is mainly pragmatic, not driven by theory. A dictionary compiler may personally consider that there is a close link between the reflexive and non-reflexive forms but may still decide, for practical reasons such as clarity, to enter *casser* and *se casser* separately.

6.3. To return briefly to the English-French half, we can see that, here, there is no question of separating *casser* and *se casser* as such forms will be found according to which examples the compiler chooses and how s/he decides to translate them, but there is no reason to group them, either, unless the specific entry requires it. This is quite distinct from the (different though related) problem arising from the fact that dictionaries normally distinguish transitive verbs from intransitive, so that "*I broke the cup/branch*" is in a different part of the entry from "*the branch/ the cup broke*". Even within the intransitive sub-entry, there are reflexive and non-reflexive translations side by side, but few indications as to how to distinguish between them.

6.4. One final point about the distinct uses that can be made (but rarely are) of monolingual as well as bilingual dictionaries. It does not seem to me that the monolinguals perform any better: the entries for *casser* and *passer* in *Le Petit Robert* do not appear any clearer than the bilingual entries already cited. This is not actually surprising, given the different aims of monolingual dictionaries.

It should not be supposed that the picture is wholly negative: there are excellent translations; very good contexts; well-chosen pairings (*passer/s'ecouler*; *se passer/arriver*). But there is also confusion and insufficient differentiation in the cases that interest us; and the best help is in the English-French halves.

7. Conclusion

It is of course always possible to select an area of vocabulary and to show how dictionaries fail to handle it as fully as one would like. Nonetheless, this is certainly what I have found in some of the instances cited here. This is unfortunate, as my data (incomplete, true, but gathered over several years from different groups of students) show clearly that there is a need for clear guidance in the area of intransitive verbs: learners need to know whether there is a reflexive form and, if so, how it differs in meaning and use from its non-reflexive counterpart.

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