

# Reflexivizers in English & French

---

An examination of how reflexivization occurs in both languages and differences in the processes behind reflexivization.

Conor Evans

15-Jan-18

Reflexivization in syntax refers to the process of implementing reflexive pronouns or reflexive markers in order to change the meaning of a clause. Pronouns are nominal elements whose function is one of reference. They can be divided into two distinct sub-categories of pronoun - deictic pronouns and anaphoric pronouns. Deictic pronouns are used primarily to provide context in speech. This reference may be to time, e.g. *now*, or place, e.g. *here*, within a speech situation. The term anaphoric comes from the Greek of ‘anaphora’ and literally means ‘to refer back’ or ‘to carry back’. As such, these anaphoric pronouns are used to refer back to a previously mentioned antecedent within a clause.

The English language has only one process of reflexivization. Reflexive pronouns are introduced to the clause in order to reflexivize an antecedent. This antecedent is not necessarily the subject of the clause; it can also be an object, an (oblique) argument, or a non-argument of the clause. Reflexive pronouns are found in the anaphoric category, as the reflexive pronoun is always referring back to an antecedent within the clause. They are more restricted in their usage, however, than many more ‘basic’ pronouns (e.g. *me*) and their antecedents must satisfy certain grammatical conditions in order for them to be employed. A list of English reflexive pronouns can be found at the appended **Table 1**.

Kroger (2004) proposes three major factors when describing the grammatical relationship in English between a pronoun and its antecedent: agreement, domain – what Kroger describes as the “distance” permitted between the two, and relative prominence – a notion which centres around the assignment of different importance to various grammatical relations, e.g. subject/object, in a “relational hierarchy”. Much of this discussion on reflexivization in English will centre on Kroger’s analyses and these three proposed factors.

In the following syntax tree<sup>1,2</sup> from an Irish Times (Grenham, 2017) article, we see clearly the presence of agreement and domain in the process of reflexivity:

- (1) “His<sub>i</sub> words ring true – later on I<sub>j</sub> find myself<sub>j</sub> way up at the Basilica de Macarena”

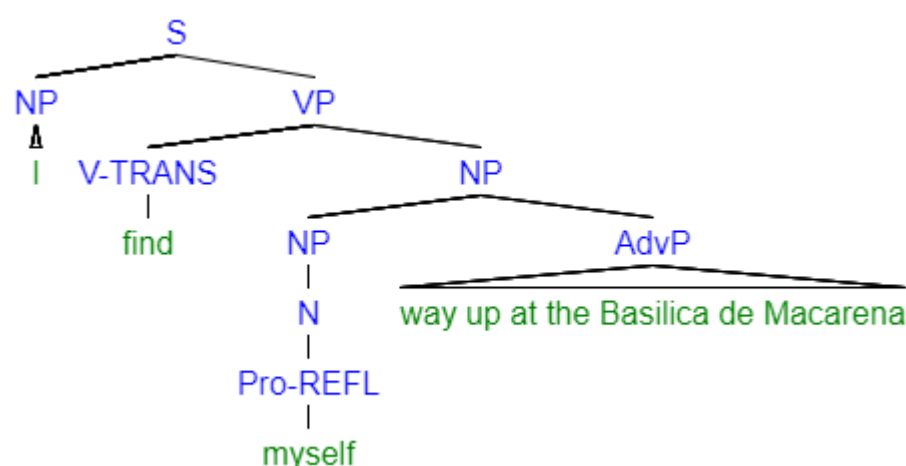


Figure 1 – A syntax tree of a sample English sentence from The Irish Times.

<sup>1</sup> Credit to Miles Shang (2011)

<sup>2</sup> The hyphen in this extract links two sentences grammatical in their own sense and, thus, could be omitted and replaced with a full stop. As the first sentence is not entirely integral for our observation – we need only have introduced the subject of “his” to note its presence as a possible antecedent - we will omit its syntax tree.

The reflexive pronoun agrees with its antecedent in person and number - English pronouns are not marked by gender unless in the third-person singular. The situation demands a first-person singular pronoun in its reflexive form. It is the most basic condition of the three and, as such, is almost instantaneous in grammatical comprehension or lack thereof. More interestingly in the above extract is the domain of the reflexive pronoun. Kroger describes the relationship between a reflexive pronoun and its antecedent as “clause-bounded” – i.e. they must be elements of the same simple clause. The example sentence satisfies this statement. As we can see below in (2), a modified example of the sentence is ungrammatical with any other reflexive pronoun – even if we have been introduced to the antecedent. If we wish to refer to an antecedent outside of the simple clause, we must use a regular deictic pronoun – in this case the third-person singular personal pronoun ‘him’.

(2) *“His<sub>i</sub> words ring true – later on I<sub>j</sub> find myself<sub>j</sub>/\*himself<sub>i</sub>/him<sub>i</sub> way up at the Basilica de Macarena”*

The third condition to account for in reflexivization is Kroger’s idea of relational hierarchy, which attributes prominence to various grammatical relations as follows:

<b>MOST PROMINENT</b>	<b>LEAST PROMINENT</b>
subject > object > oblique argument	> non-argument

Figure 2 – Kroger’s relational hierarchy.

This attribution of “prominence” is essential in reflexivization and helps to remove any ambiguity when using a reflexive pronoun. In (2), it is through assigning prominence this that we can remove any doubt about choosing the correct pronoun. The person to whom ‘I’ refers is more “prominent” as the subject of the clause than the person to whom ‘His’ refers, as the latter is a non-argument of the clause. Thus, if we wish to reflexivize the clause, it must be the more prominent grammatical relation that is reflexivized. We cannot reflexivize any less prominent relation(s) in a clause. Instead, we must use a different form of pronoun.

Carroll (1986) argues that there are two categories of English reflexive pronouns found in complementary distribution: anaphoric and non-anaphoric reflexives. The first category is concretely covered by processes such as the aforementioned three-factor system used by Kroger. However, Kroger’s system is not satisfactory when dealing with this second category of non-anaphoric reflexives.

In the following example used by Carroll, extracted from a 1982 sportscast by Tim Raine, we can clearly see the presence of a reflexive pronoun which is non-anaphoric, i.e. there is no antecedent to which it refers:

(3) *“It’s very frustrating for just myself<sub>i</sub> to have a broken hand.”*

Clearly, the clause is lacking a first-person singular person to whom the reflexive pronoun ‘myself’ would otherwise be a reference. Thus, if Raine was grammatical in using it, and Carroll’s theory holds true, we would have to agree with the inference that there is a second (non-anaphoric) category of reflexives in English. Several of Carroll’s other examples are drawn from literature.

However, the theory is not heavily supported and even Microsoft Word's in-built grammar system suggested to me to use 'me' instead of a reflexive pronoun. Raine may simply have been ungrammatical; authors may simply have used reflexives based on a self-preferred linguistic flow rather than a grammatical basis. Nevertheless, the proposal is worth acknowledging and, as Carroll goes on to investigate, would be parallel to systems in other languages such as French.

The other language I will analyse in this document is French. In this examination of reflexivity in French, I will look at the usage of reflexive pronouns, similarly to English, as well as looking at the use of the unstressed clitic pronouns in the pronominal tense – a tense that the English language does not have - and how they are used to reflexivize a pronominal verb.

Pronominal verbs, or '*les verbes pronominaux*', are always accompanied by a clitic pronoun, which can be found listed in **Table 2**. This pronoun can refer to a direct object or an indirect object. Pronominal verbs are not by nature reflexive. As noted by Hawkins and Towell (2010), many non-reflexive pronominal verbs exist e.g. *s'appeler Jean* 'to be called Jean'. However, they are commonly used reflexively.

Their formation is identical to non-reflexive pronominal verbs. In order to differentiate between the two types of verb, we say that pronominal verbs are used reflexively when the verb is describing an action which the subject does to themselves, himself, etc., such as *se laver* 'to wash oneself':

(4 <sup>3</sup> )	'je <sub>i</sub>	me <sub>i</sub>	lave'	
	SBJ	REFL <sup>4</sup>	wash-1SG-PRES	
	'I	self	wash';	'I wash (myself)'

Here, similarly to (1) in English, we see the reflexivizer agree with its antecedent in person and number. Unlike English 3SG reflexive pronouns, however, the French 3SG clitic reflexivizer does not agree with its antecedent in number or gender. This can be seen in **Table 2**, where the clitic pronoun 'se' is used for masculine, feminine, and neuter pronouns in 3SG, as well as being used for the 3PL. This can create ambiguity in interpretation:

(5 <sup>5</sup> )	'Il(s)	se	ressemble(nt)'	
	SBJ	REFL	resemble-PRES-3SG(3PL)	
	'He(They)	self	ressemble';	'He resembles himself'('They resemble themselves' or 'They resemble each other' <sup>6</sup> )

<sup>3</sup> Glossed under Leipzig Glossing Rules (see appended list). Example drawn from Hawkins pg. 210.

<sup>4</sup> As I go on to discuss in consequent paragraphs, there are conflicting opinions on the reference to the pronouns in **Table 2** as reflexive. Many linguists disagree with this stance, instead preferring to refer to it as a clitic pronoun that acts as a reflexive marker. Even Hawkins, from whom **Table 2** is drawn, notes that these pronouns used in the pronominal conjugation are not always used reflexively. To avoid overstepping the scope of this discussion, we will gloss them as REFL pro tem.

<sup>5</sup> Example drawn from Labelle p.g. 865 footnote 24, with the addition of a 3PL adaptation of the sentence.

Both interpretations are phonetically identical<sup>7</sup>: [il sə ʁəsɑ̃bl]. This issue does not arise in reflexivization in English and shows that ambiguity can arise without full agreement between reflexivizer and antecedent.

Furthermore, this form of reflexivization differs from English in that domain and prominence are irrelevant. As the clitic reflexivizers can only occur in apposition to a verb, their only possible antecedent is the subject of the clause. There is no possible antecedent outside of the simple clause that can be reflexivized unless they are also the subject of the simple clause. As the only possible antecedent is the subject, Kroger's relational hierarchy transferred to French has only one grammatical relation.

It is important to note that although a reflexive form is produced in (4) and (5), the pronouns used in the pronominal tense are not reflexive pronouns and should not be assumed as such. This is well portrayed by Labelle (2008) with regard to lexically reflexive verbs. Taking the following example of *autoanalyser* 'to self-analyze', we can see that the verb is reflexive in and of itself and that the pronoun has no impact on reflexivizing the verb – the reflexive meaning is conveyed through the prefix. However, as denoted, the sentence loses grammaticality without its presence. Labelle explains this seeming semantic redundancy through Reinhart and Reuland's (1993) adaptation of Chomsky's (1981) 'Condition B' of the binding theory:

*Condition B - 'A reflexive predicate is reflexive marked'.*

- (5<sup>8</sup>) 'Jean s' autoanalyse'  
           *SBJ REFL self-analyse-3SG-PRES*  
       \*'Jean autoanalyse'  
       'John self self-analyzes'; 'John self-analyzes'

Thus, the clitic pronoun must be present in (5) in order for the predicate to be reflexive.

The French pronominal tense can also be used reciprocally, i.e. in a situation where several subjects are doing things to each other. The clitic pronouns used in reciprocation agree with their antecedent in person and in number. They are identical to reflexive pronominals in that neither domain nor prominence is an important factor in reflexivization as the clitic pronoun is apposed to the verb and, by default, its agent – which is the subject of the clause. Reciprocation has the same formation as reflexive verbs where the verb is accompanied by a clitic pronoun and, as such, can lead to semantic ambiguity. The following example<sup>9</sup> can be read in two different manners. The former is reflexive while the latter is reciprocal.

---

<sup>6</sup> Briefly touches on reflexive/reciprocal ambiguity. This is discussed in greater detail further on.

<sup>7</sup> Drawn from IPA alphabet (2015)

<sup>8</sup> Example drawn from Labelle p.g. 841.

<sup>9</sup> Example drawn from Hawkins p.g. 215.

(6)	[Les	boxeurs <sub>i</sub> ]	se <sub>i</sub>	sont	blessés	
		SBJ	REFL	AUX	hurt-3PL-PAST	
	'The	boxers	self		hurt';	'The boxers hurt themselves'
	'The	boxers	each-self		hurt';	'The boxers hurt each other'

One way of distinguishing between the two, as noted by Hawkins<sup>5</sup> as well as Labelle, is the presence of the expression *l'un l'autre* or its feminine/plural versions. The following adaptation of (5) removes any ambiguity:

(7)	[Les	boxeurs <sub>i</sub> ]	se <sub>i</sub>	sont	blessés	[l'	un	l'	autre] <sub>i</sub> '
		SBJ	REFL	AUX	hurt-3PL-PAST	ART	DET-SG	ART	N-SG
	'The	boxers	self		hurt	the	one	the	other';
	'The	boxers	hurt each other'						

In the absence of a reciprocal pronoun, the interpretation is ambiguous and the listener or reader must rely on contextual information to make their judgment. As previously noted, the clitic pronoun must be present as a reflexive marker for the predicate to be reflexive. However, it does not always reflexivize a predicate, as can be seen in one interpretation of (6).

Above, we have looked at the core aspect of reflexivity in French. Reflexivization, however, is not limited solely to prominal verbs. Certain reflexive pronouns<sup>10</sup>, which take the form of a strong pronoun + '*même*' (henceforth referred to as *MÊME* form), can be found in conjunction with the unstressed pronoun or alone. In the latter scenario, there are constraints on the reflexive pronoun. The predicate must not be otherwise reflexive and may be reflexivized if the pronoun is neither accusative nor dative, such as:

- a. Pierre votera pour lui-même.  
b. \*Pierre se votera pour lui-même.  
Pierre (SE) vote-FUT-3S for himself  
'Pierre will vote for himself.'

Fig 3 – Drawn from Labelle pg 847.

*MÊME* reflexivizers agree with their antecedent in both person and number, unlike clitic reflexivizers. However, they do not agree in gender. This is once more seen in the 3SG reflexivizer which is used for feminine, masculine, and neuter antecedents. This form of reflexivization is preferable when dealing with Adjective Phrases (APs) (Carroll, 1986). As the clitic pronoun can only be attached to verbs, there are no anaphoric reflexives in French comparable to *John is true to himself*<sup>11</sup> (see (8)). Instead, the *MÊME* form is employed:

<sup>10</sup> Once more, there is differing opinions on categorizing '*même*' pronouns as reflexive. Carroll among others treats them as non-anaphoric reflexives markers.

<sup>11</sup> Examples (7) and (8) are drawn from Carroll, though are slightly edited. The sentence '*John is true to himself*' used by Carroll does not correspond to (7), where she instead uses '*infidèle*' or the negated adjective '*fidèle*' meaning 'true'. For the sake of clarity, I have edited (7) and (8) to amend this ambiguity.

- (8) \**Jean s' est fidèle.*  
 SBJ REFL is-COP ADJ  
 'John self is true'; 'John is true to himself'
- (9) *Jean est fidèle à lui-même.*  
 SBJ is-COP ADJ PREP REFL  
 'Jean is true to him-self'; 'John is true to himself'

Carroll notes that this is the preferred form of reflexivizing APs as strong pronouns are not operators. Thus, they cannot be used in Operator-raising.

There is a third manner of reflexivization in French, done through the usage of strong pronouns alone (Carroll, 1986) – a list of which are available at **Table 3**. Although strong pronouns do exist in English, they are not used in the same manner and are actually a deictic form of pronoun. The usage of strong pronouns, e.g. '*lui*' *him*, and the MÊME form, e.g. '*lui-même*', are not entirely mutually exclusive. Their main difference in usage lies in co-reference. Wherever the predicate forces co-reference between its arguments (see (10)), the strong pronoun will occur. In cases where the predicate does not force co-reference, the reflexive MÊME form will occur. As Carroll notes, the occurrence of either form depends upon semantic and pragmatic factors involving "expectations of appropriateness to the situation".

- (10) '*Arthur est fier de lui.*'  
 SBJ is-COP ADJ PREP REFL  
 'Arthur is proud of him'; 'Arthur is proud of himself'

Strong pronouns as reflexivizers are more ambiguous when considering the domain of the reflexivizer. Though it is possible for (10) to be read as a reflexive clause, the reflexivizer could – as seen in the English translation – be interpreted as a non-reflexive pronoun, linked to an antecedent outside of the minimal clause. Whereas clitic reflexivizers domain is fixed as they are attached to a verb and its subject (the antecedent), here the domain is unclear and the comprehension of '*Arthur*' in (10) as the antecedent to the strong pronoun is down to interpretation of "expectations of appropriateness to the situation". The idea behind Kroger's domain condition is still applicable here. However, it is not as useful for confirming whether a reflexivizer or a non-reflexive pronoun is more grammatically appropriate to use in any given speech situation.

Having examined both English and French reflexive pronouns in detail, there are many similar and contrasting features across their grammatical composition and usage. On the most basic level, both languages have a distinct set of reflexivizers and, thus, can undergo reflexivization. Delving deeper, we can see that there are a variety of similarities and differences behind the process of reflexivization in each language.

One of the more glaring contrasts, especially for a native English speaker learning French, is the presence of reflexive verbs in French – a category that does not exist in English. While identical results can be achieved in reflexivization, as seen in Figure 3, the processes to arrive at each result are vastly different. English sees the employment of a reflexive pronoun to reflexivize the clause, whereas in French we see the verb used in its pronominal form in order to reflexivize the clause. Notably, the reflexivized French clause is even devoid of a reflexive pronoun. Instead, a clitic reflexive marker is used in its stead.

Moreover, English reflexive pronouns are usually anaphoric – though both anaphoric and non-anaphoric reflexives are realised by the same word (Carroll). Furthermore, the distinction between anaphoric and non-anaphoric elements in reflexivization is clear in French. The clitic is always an anaphor. As argued by Carroll and other such as Zribi-Hertz (1995), the strong pronoun ‘lui’ and its reflexive counterpart ‘lui-même’ are non-anaphoric.

Similarly, both languages have emphatic pronouns. These pronouns are identical to their respective form of reflexivizer (see (10) and Figure 4). However, they do not reflexivize the clause. Rather, they are used as intensifiers in apposition to their antecedents:

(10)	<i>'Renaud diffuse</i>	<i>ses</i>	<i>MP3</i>	<i>lui-même</i>	<i>[ sans l' avis de Virgin !]</i>
	SBJ	broadcast-3SG-PRES	POSS	N-SG	EMPH <sup>12</sup>
	<i>'Renaud broadcasts his</i>	<i>MP3</i>	<i>him-self</i>	<i>without the consent of</i>	<i>Virgin!'</i>

---

<sup>12</sup> The Leipzig glossing rules offer no abbreviation for Emphatic Pronouns. Throughout this discussion, I will use ‘EMPH’.



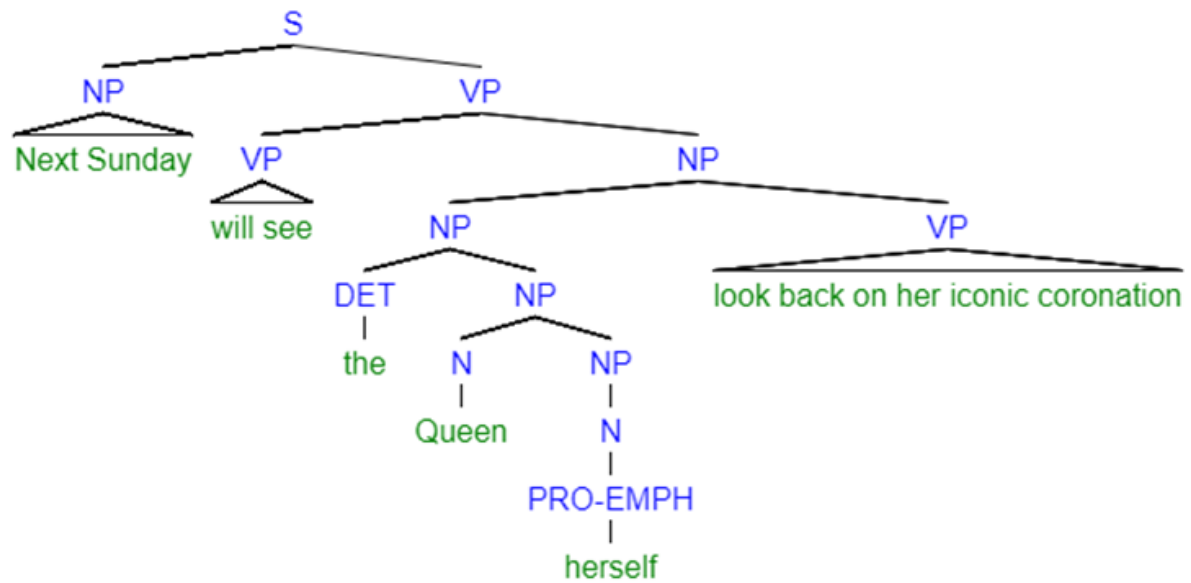


Figure 4 – Example sentence containing an emphatic pronoun. Drawn from RadioTimes (Fullerton, 2018)

Unlike French and English, other languages have emphatic forms that are distinct from the reflexive form (e.g. German *sich* REFL / *selbst* EMPH).

Overall, the processes behind reflexivization in French and English are quite different and transferring one's knowledge of either language across to the other would not be inherent. Through reading theories and proposals from a variety of linguists, I feel I have greatly advanced my knowledge of reflexivization.

# List of Abbreviations

## Glossing

**1** – 1<sup>st</sup> person

**2** – 2<sup>nd</sup> person

**3** – 3<sup>rd</sup> person

**ADJ** - Adjective

**ART** - Article

**AUX** - Auxiliary

**COP** - Copular

**DET** - Determiner

**EMPH** - Emphatic

**N** – Noun

**OBL** - Oblique

**PAST** - Past

**PL** - Plural

**POSS** - Possessive

**PRES** - Present

**PREP** - Preposition

**REFL** - Reflexive

**SBJ** - Subject

**SG** - Singular

## **Syntax Trees**

**AdvP** – Adverb Phrase

**DET** - Determiner

**EMPH** - Emphatic

**N** - Noun

**NP** – Noun Phrase

**PRO** - Pronoun

**REFL** - Reflexive

**TRANS** - Transitive

**V** - Verb

**VP** – Verb Phrase

## Tables<sup>13</sup>

**Table 1 – English Reflexive Pronouns**

	<b>FEM</b>	<b>MASC</b>	<b>NEU</b>
<b>1SG</b>			MYSELF
<b>2SG</b>			YOURSELF
<b>3SG</b>	HERSELF	HIMSELF	ONESELF
<b>1PL</b>			OURSELVES
<b>2PL</b>			YOURSELVES
<b>3PL</b>			THEMSELVES

**Table 2 – French Reflexive Pronouns<sup>14</sup>**

	<b>NEU</b>
<b>1SG</b>	ME
<b>2SG</b>	TE
<b>3SG</b>	SE
<b>1PL</b>	NOUS
<b>2PL</b>	VOUS
<b>3PL</b>	SE

**Table 3 – French Strong Pronouns**

	<b>FEM</b>	<b>MASC</b>	<b>NEU</b>
<b>1SG</b>			MOI
<b>2SG</b>			TOI
<b>3SG</b>	ELLE	LUI	SOI
<b>1PL</b>			NOUS
<b>2PL</b>			VOUS
<b>3PL</b>			EUX

<sup>13</sup> Note the following abbreviations for full understanding of tables: FEM – Feminine; MASC – Masculine; NEU – Neuter; SG – Singular; PL – Plural; 1 – 1<sup>st</sup> person; 2 – 2<sup>nd</sup> person; 3 – 3<sup>rd</sup> person.

<sup>14</sup> Drawn from Hawkins 3.2.17

## References

- Carroll, S. (1986). On Non-Anaphor Reflexives. In S. Carroll, *Revue québécoise de linguistique* (pp. 15(2) / 135-165). Université du Québec à Montréal.
- Chomsky, N. (1981). *Lectures on Government and Binding*. Foris Publications.
- Full IPA Chart. (2015). Retrieved 01 11, 2018, from International Phonetic Association: <https://www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/content/full-ipa-chart>
- Fullerton, H. (2018, 01 07). *The Queen looks back on her own coronation in new footage from upcoming BBC special*. Retrieved 01 11, 2018, from RadioTimes: <http://www.radiotimes.com/news/tv/2018-01-07/the-queen-looks-back-on-her-own-coronation-in-new-footage-from-upcoming-bbc-special/>
- Grenham, S. (2017, 12 16). *Lose yourself in searing Seville*. Retrieved 01 09, 2018, from The Irish Times: <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/travel/europe/lose-yourself-in-searing-seville-1.3315206>
- Hawkins, R., & Towell, R. (2010). *French Grammar and Usage Third Edition*. Hodder Education.
- Kroger, P. R. (2004). *Analyzing Syntax: A Lexical-Functional Approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Labelle, M. (2008). The French Reflexive and Reciprocal se. In M. Labelle, *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (pp. 833-876). Springer.
- Shang, M. (2011). *Syntax Tree Generator*. Retrieved 01 10, 2018, from Syntax Tree Generator: <http://mshang.ca/syntree/>
- Tanya, R., & Reuland, E. (1993). Reflexitivity. In T. Reinhart, & E. Reuland, *Linguistic Inquiry* 24 (pp. 657-720). DBNL.
- Zribi-Hertz, A. (1995). Emphatic or Reflexive? On the Endophoric Character of French lui-même and Similar. *Journal of Linguistics* , Vol 31 No 2 p333-374.