

SE INCOMPATIBLE PREDICATES IN SPANISH: AN RRG EXPLANATION

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Abstract

This paper deals with the question of why some Spanish verbs (e.g. *llover*, *morir*, *haber*, *gustar*) are incompatible with the reflexive clitic *se* in the so-called “impersonal construction”. Based on the proposal that *se* involves a lexical rule that privileges an undergoer argument (González Vergara 2006, 2009), I propose that this behavior can be explained straightforwardly within the framework of Role and Reference Grammar [RRG] (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997). Specifically, I argue that none of these verbs can privilege the undergoer, either because they have no macrorole argument at all (the *llover* type) or because their undergoer argument is already privileged (the *morir*, *haber*, and *gustar* type).

Keywords

Reflexive, clitic, macrorole, Spanish

1. Introduction

In Spanish, some verbal predicates seem to be incompatible with the reflexive clitic *se*, as illustrated by (1a)-(1d):

- (1) a. *Se llueve
REFL rain.3SG
LS: **do'** (**rain'**)
b. *Se murió
REFL die.PAST.3SG
LS: INGR **dead'** (Ø)

- c. *Se hay nubes en el cielo
 REFL there-is.3SG clouds in the sky
 LS: **be-in'** (cielo, nubes)
- d. *Se gusta el cine
 REFL like.3SG the movies
 LS: **like'** (Ø, cine)

(1a), (1b), and (1c,d), respectively, involve activity, achievement, and state. The verb in (1a) selects no argument, the verb in (1b) selects one, while the verbs in (1c,d) select two. These examples prompt us to ask what these predicates have in common and why they are incompatible with *se*. These questions lead to another question of what the meaning/function of *se* is.

I will propose below that these data can be explained in terms of the properties of the clitic *se*.

2. The Nature of Spanish *se*

In Spanish, the clitic *se* appears as an essential component of a wide range of syntactic constructions. One of the most widely known classifications of the uses of *se* divides them into the following six subtypes (adapted from Hernández 1966):

- (2) a. Reflexive and reciprocal *se*
 mis amigos se golpearon.
 “My friends hit (themselves/each other).”
- b. Passive-reflexive *se*
 se construyeron muchas escuelas.
 “Many schools were built.”
- c. Impersonal-reflexive *se*
 se acusó a Pedro.
 “Pedro was accused.”
- d. “Interest *se*”
 Pedro se bebió una cerveza.
 “Pedro drank up a beer.”
- e. “Intrinsic *se*”
1. “Psychological” intrinsic-*se*
 Pedro se enojó.
 “Pedro got angry.”
 2. “Physical” intrinsic-*se* with an animate/inanimate argument
 Pedro se levantó.
 “Pedro got up.”

La puerta se cerró.
 “The door closed.”

- f. Middle *se*
 Esta puerta se cierra fácilmente.
 “This door closes easily.”

In González Vergara (2006, 2009), I proposed that the uses of *se* illustrated by (2b,c,e,f) involve a lexical rule that modifies the logical structure of the sentence in such a way as to diminish the actor’s role and to privilege the undergoer when it is present (cf. Centineo 1995; Van Valin and LaPolla 1997; Bentley 2004) and makes the undergoer argument serve as the privileged syntactic argument [PSA]. Specifically, I propose the lexical rule in (3), which may apply to predicates of any *Aktionsart* type:

- (3) Given any kind of logical structure, make the argument *x* of the predicate unspecified.
- a. State: **pred'** (*x*, *y*) ↔ **pred'** (∅, *y*)
 - b. Activity: **do'** (*x*, [**pred'** (*x*, (*y*))]) ↔ **do'** (∅, [**pred'** (∅, (*y*))])
 - c. Active accomplishment:
 1. **do'** (*x*, [**predi'** (*x*, *y*))]) & BECOME **predz'** (*y*) ↔
do' (∅, [**predi'** (∅, *y*))]) & BECOME **predz'** (*y*)
 2. **do'** (*x*, [**pred'** (*x*)]) & BECOME **be-LOC'** (*y*, *x*) ↔
do' (∅, [**pred'** (∅)]) & BECOME **be-LOC'** (*y*, ∅)
 - d. Accomplishment/achievement:
 BECOME/INGR **pred'** (*x*, *y*) ↔ BECOME/INGR **pred'** (∅, *y*)
 - e. Causative:
 1. [**do'** (*x*, ∅)] CAUSE [(BECOME/INGR) **pred'** (*y*)] ↔
[**do'** (∅, ∅)] CAUSE [(BECOME/INGR) **pred'** (*y*)]
 2. [**do'** (*x*, ∅)] CAUSE [**do'** (*y*, [**pred'** (*y*))]) ↔
[**do'** (∅, ∅)] CAUSE [**do'** (*y*, [**pred'** (*y*))])]

Application of the lexical rule in (3) have a variety of consequences in (2a)-(2f), but they have in common that the actor argument that would otherwise be realized as the PSA is not available for the PSA selection after the application of the above lexical rule.

As an illustration of how introduction of the reflexive clitic *se* changes a logical structure, let us consider the pair in (4):

- (4) a. Pedro ensució la camisa.
 Pedro stained.3SG the shirt
 “Pedro stained the shirt.”

- LS: [**do'** (Pedro, Ø)] CAUSE [BECOME **dirty'** (camisa)]
 b. LS: [**do'** (Ø, Ø)] CAUSE [BECOME **dirty'** (camisa)]

(4a) is a transitive sentence without the clitic *se* and involves a causative logical structure, while (4b) is the result of the application of the lexical rule to (4a).

An analogous logical structure is observed in “intrinsic *se*” sentences as in (5a), passive-reflexive sentences as in (5b), impersonal-reflexive sentences as in (5c) (in order to obtain this meaning, it is necessary to change the inanimate argument *camisa* “shirt” with a human argument *Juan*) and middle *se* sentences as in (5d):

- (5) [**do'** (Ø, Ø)] CAUSE [BECOME **dirty'** (camisa)]
- a. “Intrinsic *se*”
 La camisa se ensució.
 the shirt REFL stained.3SG
 “The shirt got dirty.”
- b. Passive-reflexive *se*
 Se ensució la camisa.
 REFL stained.3SG the shirt
 “The shirt was stained.”
- c. Impersonal-reflexive *se*
 Se ensució a Juan.
 REFL stained.3SG to Juan
 “Juan was stained.”
- d. Middle *se*
 La camisa se ensucia fácilmente.
 the shirt REFL stained.3SG easily
 “The shirt gets dirty easily.”

3. Some Apparent Exceptions

Let’s now return to the set of verbs in (1), which I have argue cannot occur with *se* (e.g. *llover* “rain”, *morir* “die”, *haber* “have”, *gustar* “like”).

An immediate problem that comes to mind is that some of these verbs turn out to be compatible with *se*, as illustrated by (6a)-(6c):

- (6) a. El techo se llovió
 the roof REFL rain.PAST.3SG
 “The roof was rained.”

- b. Pedro se murió
 Pedro REFL die.PAST.3SG
 “Pedro died.”
- c. María se gusta
 María REFL like.PRES.3SG
 “María likes herself.”

It is important note that these verbs become compatible with *se* only when they involve the PSA. (6a,b) belong to the undergoer PSA construction, while (6c) is a reflexive construction. Nevertheless, these predicates cannot occur with *se* in the non-PSA (i.e. impersonal) construction.

We are now in a position to refine our initial question and to ask why verbs as listed in (1) are not compatible with *se* in the non-PSA construction. (7a)-(7e) are an expanded set of those verbs:

- (7) a. *llover* “rain”, *nevar* “snow”, *garúar* “dizzle”, *temblar* “tremble”
 b. *morir* “die”, *aparecer* “appear”, *crecer* “grow”, *envejecer* “get old”, *adelgazar* “slim”
 c. *hay* “there is”
 d. *alcanzar* “have enough”, *apenar* “cause sorrow”, *convenir* “suit”, *costar* “take effort”, *doler* “feel hurt”, *extrañar* “feel the lack”, *faltar* “lack”, *gustar* “like”, *importar* “matter”, *interesar* “be interested”, *molestar* “be bothered”, *preocupar* “be worried”, *quedar* “have left”, *sobrar* “spare”
 e. *dar pena/miedo/gusto* “feel pity/fear/delight”

4. Proposal

If *se* is the morphological expression of the lexical rule that privileges the undergoer argument, we can explain why *se* is not compatible with the predicates in (7). The reason is that their logical structures cannot privilege an undergoer argument, either because the undergoer is already the privileged argument or because their logical structures don’t have any argument in the first place.

I propose four subtypes of *se* incompatible verbs: the *llover* type, *morir* type, *haber* type, and *gustar* type. Let’s examine all of these types below.

4.1. The *llover* type

Verbs as *llover* “rain”, *nevar* “snow”, and *temblar* “tremble (the earth)”, usually known as “weather verbs”, involve an activity predicate **do’** with no argument in its logical structure, as illustrated in (8):

- (8) Ayer llovió/nevó /tembló
 yesterday rain.PAST/snow.PAST/tremble.PAST
 “Yesterday, it rained/snowed/trembled.”
 LS: **yesterday’ (do’ (rain’/snow’/tremble’))**

The consequence of having no argument is that these verbs have no undergoer argument. If there is no undergoer argument available, there is no way to privilege it. Therefore, these verbs are not compatible with *se*.

It has to be noted again that apparent exceptions such as (9) are not really “weather verbs” as defined above, but predicates that have at least one semantic argument that is able to function as the PSA, as demonstrated by the agreement marker on the verb:

- (9) a. Las carpas se llovieron
 the tents REFL rain.PAST.3PL
 “The tents were soaked in rain.”
 b. Los patios se nevaron
 the backyards REFL snow.PAST.3PL
 “The backyards got covered in snow.”

4.2. The *morir* type

Verbs as *morir* “die”, *aparecer* “appear”, *crecer* “grow”, *envejecer* “get old”, and *adelgazar* “slim” are accomplishment or achievement verbs that have a state predicate with one argument in their logical structures.

Since the base predicate is a state, the only arguments of these verbs are undergoers in accordance with the default macrorole assignment principles (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997). These verbs have no choice but to choose the undergoer arguments as their PSAs. This explains why these verbs cannot co-occur with *se*, because the undergoer already serves as the PSA:

- (10) a. *Se murió.
 LS: INGR **dead’** (Ø)
 b. *Se creció.
 LS: PROC **grown’** (Ø)
 c. *Se envejeció.
 LS: PROC **old’** (Ø)
 d. *Se adelgazó
 LS: PROC **thin’** (Ø)

It is worthy of notice that the *morir* type verbs cannot occur with *se* when they are part of the non-PSA construction, but that they can do so when they are part of the PSA construction as in (11) (see González Vergara 2006 for further discussion):

- (11) a. Tus mascotas se murieron
 your pets REFL die.PAST.3PL
 “Your pets died.”
- b. El equipo se creció
 the team REFL grow.PAST.3SG
 “The team grew stronger.”
- c. La actriz se envejeció
 The actress REFL get.old.PAST.3SG
 “The actress got old.”
- d. El niño se adelgazó
 The boy REFL slim.PAST.3SG
 “The boy slimmed.”

4.3. The *haber* type

Haber “have” is a two-place state predicate one of whose arguments is a locative (Fernández Soriano and Táboas 1999). However, the locative argument fails to receive an actor status and is realized by a prepositional phrase. In contrast, the second argument of *haber* “have” (theme) serves as the PSA. In order to accommodate this linking, it is necessary to stipulate the number of macroroles as in (12).

- (12) Hay nubes en el cielo
 be.PRES.3SG clouds in the sky
 “There are clouds in the sky.”
 LS: **be-in**’ (sky, clouds) [MR1]

Given that *haber* “have” involves only one macrorole (undergoer) because of [MR1], the undergoer argument serves as the PSA. Once again, we can see that *haber* “have” is not compatible with *se*, because the undergoer is already privileged as the PSA.

4.4. The *gustar* type

Verbs such as *gustar* “like”, *faltar* “lack”, *importer* “matter” and *sobrar* “spare” exhibit an unexpected syntactic behavior. *Gustar*, for instance, is

semantically similar to the English verb *like*, but their syntactic behaviors are different.

- (13) a. I like apples.
 b. (A mí) me gustan las manzanas
 (to me) 1SG.DAT like.PRES.3PL the apples
 “I like the apples.”

My proposal is that unlike the English verb *like*, *gustar* receives only one macrorole ([MR1]). Since *gustar* “like” is a state predicate, the only macrorole should be an undergoer. The actor-undergoer hierarchy requires us to choose the second argument as the undergoer. The first argument of the state predicate has no choice but to become a non-macrorole, which is optionally realized by a PP. The *gustar* type is not compatible with the clitic *se*, because it already privileges the undergoer argument as the PSA.

5. Summary

As we have seen, all of those verbs that are incompatible with *se* in the non-PSA construction have one thing in common: they cannot privilege the undergoer argument, either because they have no macrorole argument (the *llover* type) or because their undergoer argument is already privileged (the *morir*, *haber* and *gustar* type).

The above data and discussion support the proposal that Spanish *se* involves the lexical rule that modifies the logical structure of the predicate by diminishing the actor’s role and privileging the undergoer’s when it is present (González Vergara 2006, 2009).¹

¹ Verbs of the *morir* type sometimes co-occur with *se* in the non-PSA construction when they are in the imperfective aspect:

| | | | | | |
|------|-----------------|------|--------|------|-----------------|
| Se | muere/moría | bien | cuando | se | muere/moría |
| REFL | die.PRES/IMPERF | well | when | REFL | die.PRES/IMPERF |
| por | un ideal. | | | | |
| for | an ideal | | | | |

“One dies/used to die well when one dies/used to die for an ideal.”

We can also see that the meaning of the above example is similar to that of an attributive sentence (e.g. *La muerte puede ser buena cuando es por un ideal* “Dying can be good when it happens for an ideal”) (see Felíu Arquiola 2008 and González Vergara 2006, 2009 for related discussion). This and analogous examples remain as a genuine counterexample to the generalization put forward in this paper.

List of Abbreviations

| | | | |
|------|------------|------|---------------|
| DAT | dative | PRES | present tense |
| PAST | past tense | REFL | reflexive |
| PL | plural | SG | singular |

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