SPANISH SE-CONSTRUCTIONS: THE PASSIVE AND THE IMPERSONAL CONSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Spanish se-constructions have many readings. The emphasis of this paper lies on the passive and the impersonal readings, which do not exist in German or English. I show that both constructions contain implicit information, contrary to previous analyses of se in the impersonal construction as an overt subject (e.g., Rivero 2002, D’Alessandro 2004). In order to account for the constructions, I assume systematic operations that concern different grammatical levels, actually lexical conceptual structure (LCS), argument structure, and functional structure. The correct analysis for the derivation of the se-constructions discussed here can be formulated adequately within Lexical Mapping Theory (LMT), the Lexical Functional Grammar linking module (Bresnan 2001).

1 Introduction

As is well-known, Spanish se-constructions have a variety of readings. The emphasis of this contribution lies on the passive (1) and the impersonal (2) readings, which have no equivalents in, e.g., German or English.

(1) Se firmaron los contratos. passive
   REFL sign.PL the.PL contracts
   ‘The contracts were signed.’

(2) Se admira a los futbolistas. impersonal
   REFL admire.SG to the.PL soccer players
   ‘One admires the soccer players.’

As Blevins (2003) states, first, the term ‘passive’ has been misapplied to a class of impersonal constructions, and, second, impersonal constructions have been almost entirely neglected in theoretical work.

The goal of this paper is to bring out the differences and similarities between the two constructions, showing that both constructions contain implicit information. In order to account for the structures in (1) and (2), I assume systematic operations that concern different grammatical levels, i.e. lexical conceptual structure (LCS), argument structure, and functional structure. A correct analysis for the derivation of the se-constructions discussed here can be formulated adequately within Lexical Mapping Theory (LMT), the Lexical Functional Grammar linking module (Bresnan 2001).
2 The theoretical framework: Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG)

The theoretical framework underlying my analysis is Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG: Bresnan 1982, Bresnan 2001), cf. (3). A-structure functions as the interface between lexical semantics and final syntactic structure. In LFG, two levels of syntactic structure (= final syntactic structure in (3)) are distinguished, i.e., constituent structure (c-structure), accounting for constituency, and functional structure (f-structure), which models relations among the grammatical functions like subject, object, etc.:

(3) lexical semantics
    ↓                         Lexico-semantic projection
    a-structure
    ↓                         Lexico-syntactic projection
    final syntactic structure

(Bresnan 2001:303)

For the analysis given here, I will need especially LFG’s linking theory, i.e. Lexical Mapping Theory (LMT). In LMT, argument mapping is mediated by argument structure (a-structure), a level of representation in which argument positions are classified by a system of distinctive features for grammatical arguments: [±r] and [±o].

The feature [−r] refers to an unrestricted syntactic function, the kind of function which is not restricted as to its semantic role in the sense that it need not have any semantic role. The feature [−o] refers to a non-objective syntactic function.

The features constrain the mapping of thematic roles onto grammatical functions. (4) shows the intrinsic features of grammatical functions (GF), (5) shows the semantic classification of a-structure roles (see Bresnan 2001:309).

(4) Grammatical Functions (GF) classified by Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GF</th>
<th>Features</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SUBJ</td>
<td>[−r, −o]</td>
<td>r: restricted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBJ</td>
<td>[−r, +o]</td>
<td>o: objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBJθ</td>
<td>[+r, +o]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBLθ</td>
<td>[+r, −o]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(5) Semantic Classification of A-Structure Roles for Function

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>patient-like roles</th>
<th>θ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[−r]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>secondary patient-like roles</th>
<th>θ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[±o]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A mapping calculus can be constructed from features, a thematic role hierarchy as in (6), and mapping principles (7), that produces the appropriate mapping of thematic roles onto grammatical functions:

(6) Thematic Hierarchy
agent > beneficiary > experiencer/goal > instrument > patient/theme > locative

(7) Mapping Principles
a. Subject roles
The thematically most prominent role classified [–o] has to be mapped onto the subject function when initial in the a-structure. Otherwise a nonagentive, unrestricted role classified [–r] is mapped onto the subject function.
b. Other roles
All other roles are mapped onto the lowest compatible function in the partial ordering (8), where the subject is the least marked.

(8) Partial Ordering of Argument Functions
SUBJ > OBJ, OBL θ > OBJ θ

Well-formedness constraints ensure that every sentence has a subject (9), and that two arguments cannot map onto the same grammatical function (10) (Bresnan 2001:311):

(9) The Subject Condition: Every predicator must have a subject.

(10) Function-Argument Bi-uniqueness
Each a-structure role must be associated with a unique function, and conversely.

The table in (11) shows the correct mapping of lexical conceptual structure (LCS) to functional structure (f-structure) for a transitivie verb like *firmar* ‘sign’.

(11) LCS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LCS</th>
<th>agent</th>
<th>theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>features</td>
<td><em>firmar</em></td>
<td>[–o]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a-structure</td>
<td>‘sign’</td>
<td>&lt; x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f-structure</td>
<td>SUBJ</td>
<td>OBJ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3 Classification of Spanish se-constructions

Before analyzing the passive and impersonal se-constructions in detail, I would like to give a list of the main uses of the Spanish reflexives. There are large differences in how reflexive constructions are classified, depending on the classification criteria as well as the theoretical frameworks. Subsequently, I will follow more or less the classification given in Kaufmann (2004).

The main uses are those in (12): the reflexive/reciprocal (a), the decausative (b), the middle (c), the causative (d), the passive (e), the aspectual (f), and the impersonal (g).

(12) a. Juan se afeita. / Juan y Pedro se afeitan. reflexive/
    Juan REFL shaves.SG / Juan and Pedro REFL shave.PL reciprocal
    ‘Juan shaves.’ ‘Juan and Pedro shave each other.’

b. El barco se hundió. decausative
    The boat REFL sink.PAST
    ‘The boat sank.’

c. Este libro se lee fácilmente. middle
    This book REFL reads easily
    ‘This book reads easily.’

d. Juan se afeita en la barbería. causative
    Juan REFL shaves in the barber’s
    ‘Juan has himself shaved at the barber’s.’

e. Se firmó la paz. passive
    REFL sign.PAST the peace
    ‘The peace contract was signed.’

f. Juan se durmió. aspectual
    Juan REFL sleep.PAST
    ‘Juan fell asleep.’

g. Se invitó a todos los empleados. impersonal
    REFL invite.PAST to all the employees
    ‘All employees were invited.’
The passive and impersonal constructions considered here are only two of a variety of interpretations, and not all of them encode implicit information. The reflexive/reciprocal interpretation in (12a), e.g., does not contain implicit information. The agent argument is expressed by the subject Juan, and the theme argument by the reflexive clitic se. The decausative construction (12b) has no implicit argument. The agent argument was suppressed, there is no semantic agent argument at all (cf. Alencar and Kelling 2005). Engelberg (2002) defines implicit arguments as in (13):

(13) Implicit Arguments

“I will assume that a verb’s predicate constant has an implicit argument iff either (i) the verb has a variant with an explicit argument (i.e. an argument that gets syntactically realized) in the same semantic relation or (ii) there is a morphologically related verb with an explicit argument in the same semantic relation.” (Engelberg 2002:375)

Condition (ii) holds for both constructions considered here, cf. the active sentences in (14) and (15) corresponding to the reflexive passive sentence in (1) and to the impersonal sentence in (2) respectively:

(14) El futbolista firmó los contratos. active
The president sign.PAST the contracts.
‘The soccer player signed the contracts.’

(15) El jefe invitó a todos los empleados. active
The boss invite.PAST to all the employees
‘The boss invited all the employees.’

In order to account for sentences like (1) and (2) or (12e) and (12g), I assume systematic operations that concern different grammatical levels, i.e. lexical conceptual structure (LCS), argument structure, and functional structure. In the case of the passive se-construction, I will assume an argument structure manipulation, and for the impersonal se-construction, there is a change on the final syntactic structure level.

4 Analysis

An analysis for the derivation of the passive and the impersonal se-constructions will be formulated within Lexical Mapping Theory (LMT), the Lexical Functional Grammar linking module (Bresnan 2001).
4.1 The passive *se*-construction

The passive *se*-construction can only be derived from transitive verbs, and it is only available in the third person. In contrast to the periphrastic passive in (16a), the reflexive passive cannot be used when the agent of the action is mentioned (16b):

(16) a. Los contratos fueron firmados por el futbolista.  \textit{periphrastic}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
agent & los contratos \\
SUBJ & por el futbolista \\
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textit{The contracts were signed by the soccer player} \\
\textit{‘The contracts were signed by the soccer player.’} \\
\end{tabular}

b. *Los contratos \textit{se} firmaron por el futbolista.  \textit{reflexive}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
agent & los contratos \\
SUBJ & por el futbolista \\
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textit{The contracts \textit{REFL sign.PAST} by the soccer player} \\
\textit{‘The contracts were signed by the soccer player.’} \\
\end{tabular}

As in the periphrastic passive, the theme of the transitive verb is realized as a subject in the passive *se*-construction, see (17):

(17) a. El futbolista firmó los contratos. \textit{‘The soccer player signed the contracts.’}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
agent & los contratos \\
SUBJ & firmó \\
OBJ & el futbolista \\
\end{tabular}

b. Se firmaron los contratos. \textit{‘The contracts were signed.’}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
theme & los contratos \\
SUBJ & firmaron \\
\end{tabular}

c. Los contratos se firmaron. \textit{‘The contracts were signed.’}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
theme & firmaron \\
SUBJ & los contratos \\
\end{tabular}

The word order with the subject placed after the verb as in (17b) is less marked in passive *se*-constructions, but (17c) is also possible. That the agent is present on the level of LCS in passive *se*-constructions can be shown by the classical agent diagnostics, for example, by adding a purpose clause (18) or an agentive adverb (19):

(18) Se firmaron los contratos para ganar más dinero.

\begin{tabular}{ll}
REFL & firmaron \\
the.PL & los contratos \\
OBJ & para ganar más dinero \\
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textit{‘The contracts were signed in order to earn more money.’} \\
\end{tabular}

(19) Se retrasaron las reuniones deliberadamente.

\begin{tabular}{ll}
REFL & retrasaron \\
the.PL & las reuniones \\
OBJ & deliberadamente \\
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textit{‘The meetings were delayed deliberately.’} \\
\end{tabular}
It follows from these facts that we need different passive rules for the periphrastic passive and for the reflexive passive, not only with respect to the morphological change, but also in order to account for different behaviors concerning the realization of the agent role. For the reflexive passive, I propose an operation, the Reflexive Passive Operation, that suppresses the [–o] feature of the agent argument, thus preventing it from being realized at functional structure. Applying the Reflexive Passive Operation gives the result in (20): the agent cannot be mapped onto functional structure. According to mapping principles, the y-argument is mapped onto the subject function.

\[(20)\] LCS
\[\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{features} & \text{PRED} & [-r] \\
\text{a-structure} & <y> \\
\text{f-structure} & \text{REFL} + & \text{SUBJ}
\end{array}\]

The structure shows that the agent argument is present at LCS as an implicit argument. In contrast, the Periprastic Passive Operation blocks the realization of the agent argument, and it may be realized as oblique object, cf. (21):

\[(21)\] LCS
\[\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{features} & \text{PRED}_{\text{pass}} & [–o] [-r] \\
\text{a-structure} & <x> y > \\
\text{f-structure} & \text{(OBL)} & \text{SUBJ}
\end{array}\]

Thus, the difference between the reflexive passive and the periphrastic passive comes out naturally by assuming suppression on the one hand, and blocking on the other hand. The effect is that with suppression, there is no mapping of the agent onto f-structure, whereas with blocking, the agent may be mapped onto an oblique function.

### 4.2 The impersonal *se-*construction

The impersonal *se-*construction can be used with many kinds of verbal predicates\(^1\), as shown in (22). Examples include intransitive, unaccusative (22a) as well as unergative (22b), copulative (22c), and transitive (22d) predicates:

\[(22)\] (a. Se entra por aquí. *unaccusative*

\[\text{REFL} \quad \text{enter.PRES} \quad \text{by here}
\[\text{‘One enters here.’}\

\[\]
b. En este país se duerme mucho.  
In this country REFL sleep much  
‘People sleep a lot in this country.’

c. Se es feliz cuando se es honesto.  
REFL is happy when REFL is honest.  
‘One is happy when one is honest.’

d. Se encontró a los alpinistas desaparecidos.  
REFL found to the.PL mountaineer.PL disappeared.PL  
‘One has found the missed mountaineers.’

In contrast to the passive se-construction, impersonal reflexive constructions do not have an overt (theme) subject, as can be seen in the examples in (23): (23c) is ungrammatical because the verb invitaron ‘invite.PL’ neither agrees with the direct object a todos los empleados ‘all employees’ nor with a possibly existing null subject.

(23)  
a. El jefe invitó a todos los empleados.  
the boss invite.SG.PAST to all.PL the.PL employees  
‘The boss invited all the employees.’

b. Se invitó a todos los empleados.  
REFL invite.SG.PAST to all.PL the.PL employees  
‘All employees were invited.’

c. *Se invitaron a todos los empleados.  
REFL invite.PL.PAST to all.PL the.PL employees

Some linguists treat the se of the impersonal construction as subject (for example Oesterreicher 1992, Rivero 2002 or D’Alessandro 2004), equivalent to German man or French on. However, this is in contradiction with the distributional facts shown in (24) and (25) (cf. Mendikoetxea 1999, Sánchez López 2002, Suñer 1976; 1983).

(24)  
a. Ella siempre habla mucho.  
she always talks much  
‘She always talks a lot.’

b. *Se siempre habla mucho.  
REFL always talk much
c. Siempre se habla mucho.  
always REFL talks much  
‘One doesn’t talk a lot.’

(25) a. Ella no habla mucho.  
She not talk much.  
‘She doesn’t talk a lot.’

b. *Se no habla mucho.  
REFL not talk much.

c. No se habla mucho.  
not REFL talks much  
‘One does not talk a lot.’

Se does not have the distribution of subject pronouns in Spanish, neither with adverbs (24) 
nor with negation (25). Therefore, I assume that the subject is implicit, see (26) and (27).

(26) PRO siempre se habla mucho.  
‘One always talks a lot.’

(27) PRO no se habla mucho.  
‘One does not talk a lot.’

I do not assume an explicit subject argument. This is in accordance with the analysis of, e.g., 
Otero (1986) or Campos (1989) who analyzes the implicit subject of the impersonal se-
constructions as an empty indefinite pronoun (PRO_{indel}).

In LFG, the PRO is accounted for by the interaction between constituent structure and 
functional structure. The empty element is not present at c-structure, but is there as PRO in 
the f-structure, see (28) and (29).

(28)

SUBJ [ PRED PRO  
NUM SG  
PERS 3  ]
Impersonal *se*-construction

LCS   (...)  (...)
features  (...)  (...)
a-structure  (...)  (...)
f-structure  SUBJ  (...)
c-structure  Ø

So there is no suppression or blocking in this case. However, the realization of the thematic argument is limited to a PRO.

For a transitive predicate like *invitar* ‘invite’ in a sentence like (30a) (= 23a), the active/transitive mapping structure is indicated in (31), and the impersonal mapping structure of (30b) (= 23b) can be seen in (32):

(30) a. El jefe invitó a todos los empleados.  
the boss invite.SG.PAST to all.PL the.PL employees  
‘The boss invited all the employees.’

b. PRO Se invitó a todos los empleados.  
REFL invite.SG.PAST to all.PL the.PL employees  
‘One invited all the employees. / All employees were invited.’

(31) LCS  
features  *invitar*  [-o]  [-r]  
a-structure  ‘invite’  < x  y >  
f-structure  SUBJ  OBJ

(32) LCS  
features  *invitar*  [-o]  [-r]  
a-structure  ‘invite’  < x  y >  
f-structure  REFL +  SUBJ=PRO  OBJ

The subject of the impersonal sentence is PRO, and this is the agent role.

For an unaccusative verb like *entrar* ‘to enter’, for example in (33a) with an overt subject, and in (33b) with an implicit subject, we get the mapping structures in (34) and (35), respectively.

(33) a. El jefe entró a la oficina.  
the boss enter.SG.PAST to the.oficina  
‘The boss entered the office.’

b. PRO Se entró a la oficina.  
REFL enter.SG.PAST to the.oficina  
‘One entered the office.’

(34) LCS  
features  *entrar*  [-o]  [-r]  
a-structure  ‘enter’  < x  y >  
f-structure  SUBJ  OBJ

(35) LCS  
features  *entrar*  [-o]  [-r]  
a-structure  ‘enter’  < x  y >  
f-structure  REFL +  SUBJ=PRO  OBJ
(33) a. Juan entra por aquí.  
    Juan enter.PRES by here  
    ‘Juan enters here.’

    b. PRO Se entra por aquí.  
       REFL enter.PRES by here  
       ‘One enters here.’

(34) LCS  
    theme
    features   entrar  [-r]  
    a-structure  ‘enter’  < x >
    f-structure  SUBJ

(35) LCS  
    (theme)
    features   entrar  [-r]  
    a-structure  ‘enter’  < x >
    f-structure  REFL + SUBJ=PRO

In the case of an unaccusative verb, there is only a theme argument. This argument is realized as an overt subject in the unaccusative construction, whereas it is a PRO in the impersonal construction. The se indicates the change of the construction.

To sum up, the interpretation of the implicit argument in the passive and impersonal se-constructions result from different operations or conditions on different levels of the grammar.

5 Conclusion

Consider the sentences in (36):

(36) a. Es difícil vender periódicos en un país donde se leen poco.  
    is difficult sell newspapers in a country where REFL read.PL little  
    ‘It is difficult to sell newspapers in a country where they aren’t read much.’

    b. Es difícil vender periódicos en un país donde se lee poco.  
       is difficult sell newspapers in a country where REFL read.SG little  
       ‘It is difficult to sell newspapers in a country where people don’t read much.’

   (Butt and Benjamin 2000)
Both sentences, (36a) and (36b), contain implicit information. However, in (36a) we have a reflexive passive with a blocked agent argument. In this case, the theme argument of transitive leer ‘read’ is realized as subject (periódicos ‘newspapers’). In (36b), there is no agreement between periódicos ‘newspapers’ and lee ‘read.SG’, so an implicit PRO-subject must be assumed.

The two different se-construction readings are produced on different levels of the grammar. In the case of the passive se-construction (36a), the agent argument’s [–o] feature is suppressed, thus preventing it to be mapped onto functional structure.

In the impersonal se-construction (36b), the subject is there at the f-structure level. However, it is not realized at c-structure.

References


