

# Spanish *se*-constructions: the passive and the impersonal construction

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## 1 Introduction

Reflexive constructions are a challenge for the interface semantics – syntax. Spanish is especially interesting because it has a wide range of *se*-construction readings (Kaufmann 2004). 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 contracts  
'The contracts were signed.'
- (2) Se admira a los futbolistas. *impersonal*  
REFL admire.SG PREP the soccer players  
'One admires the soccer players.'

As Blevins (2003) states it, 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 Analysis

### 2.1 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 (3), the reflexive passive usually cannot be used when the agent of the action is mentioned (4):

- (3) Los contratos fueron firmados por el futbolista. *periphrastic passive*  
The contracts were signed.PL by the soccer player  
'The contracts were signed by the soccer player.'
- (4) \*Los contratos se firmaron por el futbolista. *reflexive passive*  
The contracts REFL sign.PL.PAST by the soccer player  
'The contracts were signed by the soccer player.'

As in the periphrastic passive, the theme of the transitive verb (5) is realized as a subject in the passive *se*-construction, see (6):

- (5) El futbolista firmó los contratos. 'The soccer player signed the contracts.'  
agent theme  
SUBJ OBJ
- (6) Se firmaron los contratos. 'The contracts were signed.'  
theme  
SUBJ

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 (7) or an agentive adverb (8):

- (7) Se firmaron los contratos para ganar más dinero.  
REFL sign.PL.PAST the contracts in order to earn more money  
'The contracts were signed in order to earn more money.'
- (8) Se retrasaron las reuniones deliberadamente.  
REFL delay.PL.PAST the meetings deliberately  
'The meetings were delayed deliberately.'

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 to be realized at functional structure. Applying the Reflexive Passive Operation gives the result in (9): the agent cannot be mapped onto functional structure. According to mapping principles the y-argument is mapped onto the subject function.

(9)	LCS		agent	theme
	argument structure	PRED	–	< y >
			–	[–r]
	functional structure	REFL +	–	SUBJ

The structure shows that the agent argument is present at LCS as an implicit argument.

## 2.2 The impersonal *se*-construction

The impersonal *se*-construction can be used with many kinds of verbal predicates (transitive, unaccusative, unergative, copulative). In contrast to the passive *se*-construction, impersonal reflexive constructions do not have an overt (theme) subject, as can be seen in examples (10) to (12). (11) is grammatical because the finite verb agrees with the null subject (singular). However, (12) is ungrammatical because the plural verb *invitaron* ‘invite.PL’ neither agrees with the direct object (plural) *a todos los empleados* ‘all employees’ nor with a possibly existing null subject (singular).

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

(11) Se invitó a todos los empleados. *impersonal*  
 REFL invite.SG.PAST to all.PL the employees  
 ‘All employees were invited.’

(12) \*Se invitaron a todos los empleados.  
 REFL invite.PL.PAST to all.PL the employees

Some linguists treat the *se* of the impersonal construction as subject (for example Rivero 2002), equivalent to German *man* or French *on*. However, this is in contradiction with the distributional facts shown in (13) to (18) (cf. Mendikoetxea 1999:1649, Sánchez López 2002:20f, Suñer 1976: 268).

(13) Ella siempre habla mucho. (16) Ella no habla mucho.  
 she always talks much She not speak much.  
 ‘She always talks a lot.’ ‘She does not talk a lot.’

(14) \*Se siempre habla mucho. (17) \*Se no habla mucho.  
 REFL always talk much REFL not talk much.

(15) Siempre se habla mucho. (18) No se habla mucho.  
 always REFL talks much not REFL talks much  
 ‘One always talks a lot.’ ‘One does not talk a lot.’

*Se* does not have the distribution of subject pronouns in Spanish, neither with adverbs (13) to (15) nor with negation (16) to (18). Therefore, I assume that the subject is null, i.e., I do not assume an explicit subject argument (at functional structure). This is in accordance with the analysis of, e.g., Campos (1989) who analyzes the implicit subject of the impersonal *se*-constructions as an empty indefinite pronoun.

In LFG, the PRO<sub>indef</sub> is accounted for by the interaction between constituent structure and functional structure. The empty element is not present at c-structure, but it is there as PRO<sub>indef</sub> in the f-structure.

(19) Impersonal Condition: SUBJ = PRO<sub>indef</sub> PRED (...) REFL =<sub>c</sub> +

So there is no suppression or blocking in this case. However, the subject must be an indefinite pronoun.

## 3 Conclusion

The two different *se*-construction readings are produced by a rule and a condition operating on different levels: first, the Reflexive Passive Operation that suppresses the agent argument’s [–o] feature of the transitive verb, thus preventing it to be mapped onto functional structure. Second, the Impersonal Condition ensures that, on the level of functional structure, the subject is a PRO<sub>indef</sub> in sentences like (2).

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