

Decomposing the Spanish Causative Reflexive Passive

Alex Drummond¹, Dave Kush²

¹Queen Mary University of London, ²Haskins Laboratories

¹*a.d.drummond@gmail.com*, ²*kush@haskins.yale.edu*

1. Introduction

Spanish has a passive construction formed using the reflexive clitic *se*. For many speakers, *se* can license a *by* ('por') phrase in this construction:

- 1) esta idea se rechazó (por el comité)
 this idea SE rejected (by the committee)

'This idea was rejected (by the committee).'

Our topic is the construction in (2), where *se* attaches to a causative verb whose complement appears to receive a passive interpretation:

- 2) el papa se dejó ver por muchos católicos
 the pope SE let see by many Catholics

'The Pope was seen by many Catholics'

We term this construction the Causative Reflexive Passive (CRP). CRPs have significant implications for the analysis of Romance SE. Reinhart and Siloni (2005) argue that all instances of SE have the function of absorbing the accusative Case of the local verb. However, examples such as (2) appear to show that a SE clitic in the matrix can associate with a verb in the embedded clause. Indeed, Labelle (2008) has argued on the basis of such data that R&S's analysis of SE as an absorber of local accusative Case cannot be correct.

In this paper we argue that SE plays no role in the embedded clause of a CRP. We begin in section 2 by distinguishing CRPs according to whether or not their matrix subject positions are thematic. In section 3 we give arguments against analyses that take SE to have an effect within the embedded clause. We present our own analysis of CRPs in sections 4-5. The key idea is that accusative Case assignment is itself non-local in certain causative constructions. This has the consequence that SE can have an effect on Case assignment in the embedded clause by attaching to the matrix verb. Thus, R&S's analysis of SE as an absorber of local accusative Case can be maintained.

2. Thematic and non-thematic CRP

As the translation of (2) makes clear, the matrix subject of a CRP need not be interpreted as the Agent of the matrix predicate. In other words, (2) need not have the interpretation of English (3):

- 3) The Pope let himself be seen by many Catholics.

This can be seen more clearly in examples where an agentive interpretation of the matrix subject is infelicitous:

- 4) el eclipse se dejó ver en el parque nacional
 the eclipse SE let-PAST see-INF in the national park

'The eclipse got seen in the national park.'

- 5) #The eclipse let itself be seen in the national park.

While an agentive interpretation of (2) is clearly not obligatory (in contrast to English (3)), it is nonetheless available. It seems, then, that there are two parses of (2). In both cases the embedded predicate receives a passive interpretation, but only in one case is the matrix subject assigned an external θ -role by the matrix

verb. We will refer to the structure where the matrix subject receives the external θ -role of the matrix verb as a thematic CRP and to the alternative structure as a non-thematic CRP.

French thematic CRPs are analyzed by Labelle (2008), who gives examples such as (6):

- 6) les garçons se sont laissé berné par Marie
 the boys SE AUX let-PP deceive-INF by Marie

'The boys let themselves be deceived by Marie.'

On Labelle's analysis of (6), *let* and *deceive* combine to form a complex predicate. The *se* clitic identifies the external argument of the matrix verb with the internal argument of the embedded verb. The missing object of the embedded verb is licensed by long-distance absorption of its accusative Case by SE.¹

- 7) les garçons se sont laissé berné par Marie
 The boys SE AUX let-PP deceive-INF by Marie
└──────────────────┘
-ACC

- 8) $[[se]] = \lambda P \lambda x \lambda e [P(e, x) \wedge \text{Agent}(e, x)]$
 $[[let]] = \lambda P \lambda y \lambda e \exists e' [let(e', e)] \wedge P(e, y)$
 $[[deceive \text{ by Marie}]] = \lambda z \lambda e [deceive(e, z) \wedge \text{Agent}(e, \text{Marie})]$

The hypothesis that CRPs involve long-distance Case-absorption stems from the the assumption that it is the embedded verb that assigns Case to the embedded object in a causative such as (9):

- 9) l'architecte a fait détruire l'edifice
 the architect AUX made destroy-INF the building

'The architect had the building destroyed.'

We will argue in section 4 that it is in fact the matrix verb that assigns Case to the embedded object in this configuration. Labelle's analysis is therefore correct in spirit — there is a long-distance Case dependency between the matrix and embedded clauses — but wrong in detail, insofar as the long-distance dependency holds not between matrix SE (when present) and the embedded verb, but simply between the matrix verb and the embedded object. In (6), matrix SE absorbs the accusative Case of the matrix verb, which otherwise would have been assigned to the embedded object.

The question now arises of how the optional *by* phrase is licensed in CRPs. At first glance, the *by* phrase in a CRP looks very much like an ordinary passive *by* phrase licensed by SE. However, if there is in fact no direct relation between matrix SE and the embedded clause, this cannot be correct analysis. The next section presents three arguments to the conclusion that SE has no effect within the embedded clause. We will return in section 4 to the question of how the *by* phrase is in fact licensed.

3. SE plays no role in the embedded clause

The absence of a simple SE passive in French already suggests that SE in CRPs is not passive SE, and hence not likely to be directly involved in licensing the *by* phrase or suppressing the external argument of the embedded verb. In the following three subsections we review some further reasons to reject this sort of analysis.

¹We present here the simplified version of Labelle's analysis on which the embedded verb does not have a thematic object. As an alternative, Labelle notes that the embedded verb could take a null *pro* object that subsequently undergoes QR. Labelle is not explicit regarding the manner in which the *par* ('by') phrase composes, which is why separate denotations for *deceive* and *by Marie* are not given in (8).

3.1. Restriction of CRPs to causatives

There are broadly speaking two possible means by which matrix SE might have an effect on the embedded clause, and in particular on the embedded verb. One possibility is that SE is base-generated in the matrix clause and then enters into a long-distance relation with the embedded verb (this is Labelle's analysis). The other is that SE starts out associated with the embedded verb and then climbs into the matrix. In either case, we would expect restrictions on CRPs to line up with restrictions on clitic climbing. In both French and Spanish, CRPs can be formed only with causative verbs.² In the case of French, this lines up with the restriction of clitic climbing to causative constructions. In Spanish, on the other hand, reflexive clitics (like ordinary object clitics) can climb when embedded under a wide variety of non-causative verbs:

- 10) Juan se tiene que lavar
 John SE have-PRES that wash-INF
'John must wash (himself).'

If SE can passivize the embedded verb under a matrix causative, it is unclear why it should not be able to do the same when the embedded verb is not a causative. Good examples are difficult to construct because SE passives embedded in contexts that permit clitic climbing often sound rather awkward in their own right. However, we do find contrasts such as the following:

- 11) a. *el general se ha pedido informar de los movimientos del enemigo
 the general SE AUX ask-PP inform-INF of the movements of-the enemy
 b. el general ha pedido informar-se de los movimientos del enemigo
 the general AUX ask-PP inform-INF-SE of the movements of-the enemy
'The general has asked to be informed of the movements of the enemy.'

Thus, it appears that passive SE simply cannot climb, and that it is some special property of the causative construction which gives rise to the illusion that matrix SE is active within the embedded clause in CRPs.³

²See Labelle (2008) for French and García-Miguel (2007) for Spanish.

³The inability of passive SE to climb raises a problem for R&S's unified analysis of SE. In (10) SE appears to absorb the spare accusative Case of the embedded verb and then climb in to the matrix. It should not make any difference whether this Case is going spare as a result of passivization or reflexivization. Why, then, is passive SE unable to climb in (11a)? We suspect that the key difference between reflexive and passive SE is one that R&S's presentation somewhat glosses over: only reflexive SE has an antecedent. In particular, it is clear that some sort of ϕ -agreement relation must obtain between *Juan* and *se* in examples such as (10). (If not, it would be difficult to explain why e.g. *se* changes to *me* when the antecedent is 1st-person singular.) This suggests that reflexive SE has unvalued ϕ -features in need of valuation. Passive SE, in contrast, may have no ϕ -specification at all, or perhaps a minimal default specification. If climbing of the SE clitic into the matrix clause is driven by a ϕ -probe, then we expect only passive SE to be a suitable goal. This analysis requires us to make a distinction between passive SE and reflexive SE, which is of course in tension with the unifying goal of R&S's original analysis. However, it is simply a fact that reflexive SE enters into ϕ -agreement relations whereas passive SE does not. The distinction is therefore independently motivated and perhaps even required in one form or another.

3.2. CRPs in the 1st/2nd-person

Spanish has no distinct 1st/2nd-person reflexive clitic. Ordinary 1st/2nd-person object clitics can be used to express reflexive readings:

- 12) (yo) me lavé
 (I) me washed
'I washed myself.'

The passive, on the other hand, must be formed with *se* and is not available in the 1st/2nd-person:

- 13) Juan se castigó
 John SE punished
✓'John punished himself.' *✓'John was punished.'*

- 14) (yo) me castigué
 (I) me punished
✓'I punished myself.' *✗'I was punished.'*

In contrast, CRPs are not restricted to the 3rd person:

- 15) (yo) me dejé arrastrar por el momento
 I me let-PAST sweep-away-INF by the moment
'I got caught up in the moment.'

- 16) yo también me dejé cortar el pelo por una amiga
 I too me let-PAST cut-INF the hair by a friend
'I too got my hair cut by a friend.'

Thus, *se* in these examples cannot be passive *se*.

3.3 Thematic restrictions on the *by* phrase

The *by* phrase in CRPs is incompatible with verbs whose root meaning does not imply an external cause or agent. In this respect, the *by* phrase in CRPs resembles the *by* phrase in passive nominalizations (Marantz 1997). Thus the contrast in (17)–(18) parallels that in (19):

- 17) *el sonido se dejó oír por millones de personas
 the sound SE let-PAST hear-INF by millions of people
'The sound got heard by millions of people.'

- 18) Juan se dejó afeitar por María
 John SE let-PAST shave-INF by Mary
'John got shaved by Mary.'

- 19) a. *The hearing of the sound by by millions of people.
 b. The shaving of John by Mary.

A similar contrast is found in French:

20) *le son s'est encore fait entendre par Jean
 the sound SE-AUX again make-PP hear-INF by John
'The sound got heard again by John.'

21) Jean s'est fait raser par Marie
 John SE-AUX make-PP shave-INF by Mary
'John got shaved by Mary.'

Though judgments are variable, *by* phrases in simple SE passives tend to be less thematically restricted. For example, (17) contrasts with (22):

22) el canto de los ratones no se puede oír por los humanos
 the song of the rats NEG SE can-PRES hear-INF by the humans
'The rat's song can't be heard by humans.'

4. Decomposing CRPs

The derivation of a CRP decomposes into two operations, one of which applies in the embedded clause and one of which applies in the matrix. The first operation is External Argument Reduction (EAR), which suppresses the external argument of the embedded predicate. The second, made possible by SE's absorption of the matrix verb's accusative Case, is either reflexivization (giving rise to a thematic CRP) or anticausativization (giving rise to a non-thematic CRP).⁴ Both reflexivization and anticausativization are available in the first and second person, which is consistent with the availability of first and second person CRPs:⁵

23) (yo) me afeité
 (I) me shaved
'I shaved myself.'

24) (yo) me hundi
 (I) me sank
'I sank.'

Before outlining our analysis of CRPs in more detail, it will be useful to give an overview of how reflexivization and anticausativization work within R&S's framework.

R&S analyze reflexivization in terms of a thematic "bundling" operation. According to R&S, Romance reflexivization is a syntactic operation that operates by combining two unassigned θ -roles into a single compound θ -role. The interpretation of compound θ -roles is compositional. For example, if the compound θ -role Agent-Patient is assigned to the DP *John*, the resulting interpretation is that John is both the Agent and Patient of the relevant event. Unassigned θ -roles percolate up the syntactic structure until they are assigned. R&S define bundling so that it applies to a verb's unassigned θ -roles upon merger of the phrase to which the verb assigns its external θ -role. The derivation of a simple reflexive sentence is illustrated in (25):

⁴In analyzing the matrix predicate of non-thematic CRPs as an anticausative we follow Pitteroff and Alexiadou's (2012) analysis of the German *sich-lassen* construction. We depart from P&A in denying that the embedded infinitival is a true verbal passive.

⁵It is not immediately obvious that (23) involves reflexivization, since *me* is simply the first person singular pronominal object clitic. However, first and second person pronominal object clitics can appear as the objects of "inherently reflexive" predicates (Reinhart and Reuland 1993), and when bound by the local subject they strongly resist strict readings under ellipsis. It is very likely, then, that these are not really pronominals but morphologically-indistinct reflexive forms. Similar remarks apply to (24). The clitic *me* appears to trigger exactly the same argument-structure alternation which in the third person can be triggered only by SE.

- 25) a. Juan se lava
 John SE washes
'John washes (himself).'
 b. VP: [se lava $_{\theta_i - \text{Agent}, \theta_k - \text{Theme}}$]
 c. TP: [Juan $_{(\theta_i, \theta_k)}$ [se lava $_j$ [VP t_j]]]
 d. $\exists e[\text{lava}(e) \wedge \text{Agent}(e, \mathbf{Juan}) \wedge \text{Theme}(e, \mathbf{Juan})]$

SE plays no direct role in reflexivization; it is present solely in order to absorb the verb's "spare" accusative Case. The same applies in the case of anticausativization: a thematic operation of some kind suppresses the external θ -role of the matrix verb, and SE's sole function is to absorb the no-longer-required accusative Case. Since θ -role bundling is a somewhat non-standard operation, we would like to emphasize at this point that there are other technical devices that could do the same job while preserving the spirit of R&S's analysis. One attractive alternative to θ -role bundling is movement of the antecedent DP through multiple θ -positions (Alboiu et al. 2004). Another alternative, pursued in Labelle (2008), is to pack θ -role bundling into the lexical semantics of SE. This has the disadvantage that it requires a further distinction between reflexive and passive SE. In the subsequent exposition we will continue to make use of θ -role bundling, but with the proviso that the aforementioned alternatives would work equally well.

Turning now to EAR, this operation applies within causative complements in a number of Romance languages and is not always predicated on the presence of SE. In *faire-par* causatives, found in e.g. French and Southern Cone Spanish (Kayne 1975, Torrego 1998:88), the agent of the causative complement is absent and optionally expressed in a *by* phrase:

- 26) French
 l'architecte a fait détruire l'edifice par son assistant
 the-architect has made destroy the-building by his assistant
'The architect had his assistant destroy the building.'
- 27) Southern Cone Spanish
 el arquitecto hizo destruir el edificio (por el ayudante)
 the architect made destroy the building (by the assistant)
'The architect had the assistant destroy the building.'

We assume, following Folli & Harley (2007:208), that causative verbs in the *faire-par* construction select agentless nominal VP_{nom} complements. EAR is therefore distinct from verbal passivization (since the external argument is absent from the beginning) and comparable to the lack of any obligatory expression of the external argument in nominalizations. We further assume that when the matrix verb in the *faire-par* construction embeds a transitive infinitival, the embedded object receives case not from the embedded verb (which introduces no *v* head), but from the matrix verb:

- 28) [TP el arquitecto [VP hizo [VP_{nom} destruir [DP el edificio]]]]
 +ACC

The derivation of a non-thematic CRP is illustrated in (29). When the matrix verb is anticausativized by *se*, its accusative Case is absorbed and can no longer be assigned to the embedded object. The embedded object then raises to the matrix subject position (which is no longer thematic) in order to receive Case:

- 29)
- [TP [NP el papa] se dejó [VP_{nom} ver t_i por muchos católicos]]
-

The derivation of a thematic CRP proceeds as follows. In (30), the unassigned internal θ -role of *ver* ('see') percolates up to vP, at which point it is bundled with the external θ -role of *dejó* ('let'). The resulting complex θ -role is then assigned to *el papa*:

- 30)
-
- [θ_i, θ_j]: θ_i and θ_j are separate unassigned θ -roles.
 $\langle \theta_i, \theta_j \rangle$: θ_i and θ_j are bundled together.

It remains to account for the apparent link between matrix SE and EAR in non-Southern-Cone dialects of Spanish (where (29)–(30) are possible but (27) is not). The generalization appears to be that only Southern Cone Spanish permits long-distance Case assignment, so that in other Spanish dialects the object of V_{nom} is unable to receive Case in situ. We will look into the mechanics of long-distance Case assignment in the next section. First, let us briefly consider why CRPs require the presence of SE in the matrix in non-Southern-Cone dialects. In the case of both thematic and non-thematic CRPs, we have a matrix verb with an accusative Case to assign that cannot assign this Case owing to the impossibility of long-distance Case assignment in the dialects under consideration. SE is therefore required in order to absorb this additional Case.

5. Inheritance and the mechanics of long-distance Case-assignment

A potential concern with the preceding analysis is its reliance on a mechanism of long-distance Case assignment. The availability of this mechanism in *faire-par* causatives and in CRPs carries with it the risk of overgeneration. For example, if the embedded verb is one that does not typically assign accusative Case to its object, it should nonetheless be possible for its object to receive Case from the matrix verb. We might therefore expect that the deep object of an embedded unaccusative should be able to receive Case directly from the matrix verb:

- 31) *Juan hizo llegar tarde María
 John made-PST arrive-INF late Mary
 'John made Mary arrive late.'

A closer look at F&H's analysis suggests a solution to this problem. F&H propose the following structure for *faire-par* causatives:

- 32)
-

While F&H do not elaborate their analysis in phase-theoretic terms, it would be natural to understand (32) as a single-phase structure, with v_{CAUS} the phase head and VP_{nom} its complement. In this case, the features of

v_{CAUS} responsible for objective Case assignment will be inherited by V in the normal way (Chomsky 2008). SE can be understood to absorb these features of v_{CAUS} and thereby prevent their transfer to V. Crucially, now that Case assignment to the embedded object is mediated through V, the choice of V may still determine whether or not Case assignment is possible. Thus, unaccusative V in (31) will not be able to assign Case. How exactly this plays out will depend on the details of the theory of Case assignment. It may be that some instances of V are incompatible with the relevant features of v_{CAUS} and thus unable to inherit them. Alternatively, it may be that all instances of V can inherit these features, but that Case assignment is predicated on the presence of additional features that only some instances of V possess. In non-Southern-Cone dialects, inheritance is impossible across the board in the configuration in (32). This leaves all instances of v_{CAUS} with an accusative Case that must be absorbed by SE.

6. Conclusion

The Spanish Causative Reflexive Passive can be decomposed into two separate operations: External Argument Reduction, which applies in the embedded clause, and either reflexivization or anticausativization, which apply in the matrix. The analysis generalizes to the parallel French constructions, and removes one of the main obstacles to a unified analysis of Romance SE as an absorber of accusative Case (Reinhart and Siloni 2005). Labelle (2008) argues against this analysis on the grounds that it cannot account for the ability of SE to passivize the embedded clause in CRPs. On the present analysis, however, SE absorbs the accusative Case of the matrix verb, just as in simple reflexive or passive sentences formed with SE.

References

- Alboiu, G., Barrie, M., and Frigeni, C. (2004). ‘se’ and the unaccusative-unergative paradox. In Coene, M., de Cuyper, G., and D’Hulst, Y., editors, *Antwerp Working Papers in Linguistics: Current Studies in Comparative Romance Linguistics 107*, pages 109–139.
- Chomsky, N. (2008). On Phases. In Friedin, R., Otero, C. P., and Zubizarreta, M. L., editors, *Foundational issues in linguistic theory: Essays in honor of Jean-Roger Vergnaud*, pages 133–166. MIT Press.
- García-Miguel, J. M. (2007). Syntactic and semantic integration in the Spanish causative-reflexive construction. In Delbecq, N. and Cornillie, B., editors, *On Interpreting Construction Schemas: From Action and Motion to Transitivity and Causality*, pages 202–227. Walter de Gruyter.
- Kayne, R. S. (1975). *French Syntax: the Transformational Cycle*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Labelle, M. (2008). The French reflexive and reciprocal *se*. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*, 26(4):833–876.
- Marantz, A. (1997). No escape from syntax: Don’t try morphological analysis in the privacy of your own lexicon. *University of Pennsylvania working papers in linguistics*, 4(2):14.
- Pitteroff, M. and Alexiadou, A. (2012). On the properties of German *sich-lassen* middles. In *Proceedings of the 29th West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics*, pages 214–222.
- Reinhart, T. and Reuland, E. (1993). Reflexivity. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 24(4):657–720.
- Reinhart, T. and Siloni, T. (2005). The lexicon-syntax parameter: Reflexivization and other arity operations. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 36(3):389–436.
- Reuland, E. (2001). Primitives of binding. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 32(3):439–492.
- Torrego, E. (1998). *The Dependencies of Objects*, volume 34. The MIT Press, Cambridge.